



Travel Topics

Issue 136

Autumn 2022

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



tonbridgecommuters.org.uk



[@TonLinCommuters](https://twitter.com/TonLinCommuters)



facebook.com/tonbridgecommuters

Strikes hit the railway as cost-of-living rises

In the last issue of *Travel Topics*, we wrote how the Russian invasion of Ukraine had caused fuel prices to rise and that higher prices seemed here to stay. Sadly, we were not wrong. The current cost of living crisis is continuing to intensify, accompanied by industrial action in a number of sectors. The rail industry is bearing the brunt of this, with numerous strikes called by the RMT, ASLEF and TSSA unions. The main issue at stake is pay, with Network Rail and train operators demanding the adoption of more flexible working practices, amongst other things, in exchange for a more generous pay offer.

It is not for Tonbridge Line Commuters to take sides in the disputes. We can, however, be sympathetic to demands of higher pay in the face of surging price rises, particularly for the lowest paid employees such as platform staff. That said, there is clearly a need for the rail industry to keep its costs down given its post-pandemic need for greater taxpayer support. It feels like the resolution of the dispute may depend on addressing the problem of inflation more generally. With prices spiralling it seems likely that any given pay offer will soon enough feel even more inadequate than now.

On ASLEF strike days Southeastern is offering no service anywhere on its network. On RMT strike days it only runs trains on a handful of routes and these do not include Tonbridge. The nearest service on RMT strikes days runs from Sevenoaks to London Bridge (or on one occasion Victoria). This is disappointing given the importance of Tonbridge in the Kent network. Southeastern has told us it is focusing on metro routes because they are cleared for Driver Only Operation (DOO) and drivers are typically members of ASLEF rather than the RMT.

However, we have pointed out that DOO is permitted between Sevenoaks and Tonbridge provided there is no call at Hildenborough, so services could be extended to Tonbridge with a little imagination.

Southern does not run services on the Tonbridge-Redhill line on RMT strike days, concentrating on what it sees as its core routes. In theory ASLEF strikes do not currently extend to Southern, but in fact many Tonbridge-Redhill services are crewed by Southeastern staff. This means that Tonbridge-Redhill services are heavily reduced on ASLEF strike days, with trains running every two hours or less, and buses operating early and late in the day. We have asked Southern to prioritise services for schools when ASLEF strikes are called on weekdays. However, it is noticeable that many of the strikes are called on Saturdays, which perhaps demonstrates the relative importance of leisure travel in the wake of the pandemic.

At present there seems no prospect of a quick end to the disputes, and it not yet clear whether Mark Harper, the latest Secretary of State for Transport, will be prepared to meet the unions. This is something that his predecessor but one, Grant Shapps, refused to do. Although the Government does not directly employ railway workers, it does now have a major say in how the industry is run, and so it is surely better for there to be a dialogue between the Government and the unions. The strikes are a major inconvenience for passengers and damaging to the reputation of the railway, with people likely to turn to their cars when they feel they cannot rely on the train. Let us hope a pathway can be found to end the disputes and return to business as usual as soon as possible.

JM

Southeastern's December 2022 timetable – Why ask the passengers?

For some time, we have been pressing Southeastern to restore its usual consultations ahead of timetable changes. We believe timetables are better planned with passenger feedback from the outset, but it seems that Southeastern no longer agrees with that. When challenged about the lack of consultation, the company claimed that circumstances were different due to the aftermath of the pandemic and the fact that it is now publicly owned. Apparently “passenger travel patterns continue to be in flux” and this means that Southeastern is obliged simply to develop “demand-led” timetables which offer value for money for the taxpayer. It tells us that the Department for Transport has therefore given it permission dispense with formal consultations.

We find this response disappointing and illogical. In reality, Southeastern is no longer continually adapting its timetable due to changing COVID restrictions and instead has reverted to regular twice yearly timetable changes. It is now hardly the case that travel patterns are in flux, with demand having settled down albeit in a different shape to before the pandemic. In short, Southeastern cannot just keep blaming the pandemic indefinitely for its failure to consult with its passengers. It is a pity that it cannot see that a timetable developed with passenger input is more likely to be successful than one without.

The lack of consultation might be more forgivable if the timetable was not changing much, but it transpires the timetable starting on 11 December 2022 marks a radical departure from the current timetable. Almost all train times will change, and some service patterns are very different. We were offered a briefing (rather than chance to give feedback) on the timetable but in practice Southeastern failed to arrange this ahead of the plans being announced to the public.

So, what does the timetable have in store for passengers in our area? One highly regrettable change is that most Medway Valley line services will no longer run through to Tonbridge, severing the link to the county town of Maidstone. Southeastern claims that this is to “reduce congestion at Tonbridge” and this is “part of a plan to reduce congestion at all junctions, which will improve punctuality and see fewer cancellations”. This is odd given that there is scarcely any evidence that the current through running of services causes delays, and that the timetable also introduces new through services between Maidstone East and

TRAVEL TOPICS – AUTUMN 2022

Charing Cross, which is going to cause a considerable congestion at the junctions near Chislehurst. One positive feature, however, is that the off-peak service frequency between Paddock Wood and Maidstone West is being increased from hourly to half hourly. Going from Tonbridge to Maidstone West there is a 13-minute change at Paddock Wood and an 8-minute change in the opposite direction. Trains at school times will continue to run through to Tonbridge.

In the rush hour, the major difference is that trains starting or terminating at Tunbridge Wells will call at Orpington rather than Chelsfield. This is likely to cause these trains to be much busier, which will be a particular problem for passengers in the evening boarding at London Bridge to travel to Hildenborough or Tonbridge. Passengers for Tonbridge will be best advised to avoid these trains, but the good citizens of Hildenborough will have little choice given the continuing paucity of services from Cannon Street.

One major win for TLC is that there will now be half-hourly services on the Ashford-Paddock Wood-Charing Cross route throughout the day on Saturdays and most of the day on Sundays. This addresses a major problem with the current timetable, which sees fewer trains during the middle of the day on weekends despite demand often being higher on weekends than on weekdays. Direct off-peak and weekend services between Tonbridge and Canterbury West have also been restored.

Passengers must check the times of all their trains, since almost every train has been retimed. Sadly, services are still poorly spaced at many times of day. For instance, on weekday off-peak hours trains from Tonbridge to London will run with gaps of up to around 23 minutes, which is worse than the current gaps of 20 minutes. Off-peak trains from Charing Cross to Tonbridge will leave with gaps of up to 21 minutes, which is a very slight improvement on the current gaps of 25 minutes.

Southeastern has suggested it is likely to return to proper consultations on its timetable in future, starting from the May 2023 timetable. We will hold it to this promise, as it is essential that timetables are constructed with passenger input. Please do let us know what in the December 2022 timetable works for you and what does not, so we can pass on appropriate feedback.

JM

Annual General Meeting 2022

True to form, our 64th AGM on 12 May 2022 provided an important opportunity for members to hear an update on our activities and to question representatives from the rail industry. The meeting was held on Zoom with speakers from Southeastern and Southern. Sadly, we were unable to secure a speaker from Network Rail, despite our best efforts. We hope this will be put right in future meetings.

The Chairman's address noted the sad death of TLC stalwart John Reynolds and highlighted concerns about keeping rail travel affordable and the need for flexible season tickets to be more flexible. A Resolution extending the reach of TLC to Leigh, Penshurst and Edenbridge stations was approved. The committee was re-elected but with Steve Terry standing down and Philip Gale, Zak Darwood and Laura Hillier confirmed as new committee members.

The first guest speaker was George Paterson from Southeastern. He noted that patterns of commuting had changed fundamentally since the pandemic. Additional services from Tonbridge in the May 2022 timetable represented a win for TLC but the

onus was on Southeastern to prove that services were delivered in a way that was fair for taxpayers.

Speaking next, Paul Codd from Southern stressed the need for the rail industry to be flexible in the aftermath of COVID. The leisure travel market had recovered more strongly than commuting, with season ticket revenue down. Mr Codd described the Tonbridge-Redhill line as a "lifeline service" given the lack of alternatives to rail along the corridor.

The speakers fielded questions from members, including on staffing, rolling stock replacement and service capacity. There was a win for TLC when it was confirmed that that direct off-peak services from Tonbridge to Canterbury West would be restored in the December timetable.

We had a reasonable turn out, but it would be good to see even more members joining us in future. It is a great opportunity to put those difficult questions directly to rail industry managers. We are planning to hold the next AGM on **Thursday 11th May 2023**, so please pencil that date into your diary. We will confirm details by email and in the Spring 2023 issue of *Travel Topics*.
JM

Tickets Please – but you can only buy online

Over the summer, TLC has been campaigning for ticket offices at stations to be retained and improved. There is a long-standing rumour that one of the barriers to agreeing a pay deal with the unions is that the Government expect all ticket offices to be 'repurposed', and for people to lose their jobs. Our view is simply that the ticketing system is too complicated to be online only and, while the system is as complicated as currently, there is a need for people to be able to speak to a human to ensure that they get the right ticket. There are also accessibility issues for people who may need assistance or struggle with using machines.

For many of you, buying online will be second nature and that is to be celebrated. I suspect that in time the percentage of tickets bought online will only increase. Former transport secretary Grant Shapps made a big point of saying that 1 in 8 (12.5%) of tickets were still being bought 'over the counter'. Assuming this is true, that is still quite a high number. Certainly, at Hildenborough there are always healthy queues in the morning for people looking to buy tickets.



An all-too-common sight at Hildenborough - ticket office shut, and ticket machine out of order.

At Hildenborough, our regular staff member is on maternity leave, and we hope she is doing well. However, there has been no maternity cover arranged, and other staff members are filling in on an ad-hoc basis. On some days there have been two members of staff, which was rather unnecessary and other days there has been nobody. Sometimes we have had a train conductor operating out of the ticket office but with a handheld machine, as they are 'not permitted' to operate the ticket office. From speaking to one member of staff, I understand that this is because they do not have the correct level of

training, which essentially boils down to whether they can issue a car park ticket.

Now TLC is not wedded to the need for a person sat behind a counter, but we do want staff to be accessible and available to help people. There is also a world of difference between staffing levels at a station like Tonbridge and at somewhere more rural like Hildenborough. If one member from the ticket office is removed at Tonbridge, then the speed of service may decrease but things will tick along. If you take the part-time staff member away from Hildenborough, then there is nobody to open

the waiting room, nobody to open the toilets, and so the station facilities completely cease. In the cold winter months that are to come this is not a particularly enticing prospect.

Either way, we would call for the ticketing system to be simplified so that people can be confident that they are getting the right ticket at the right price, so they are not being ripped off. Hopefully with yet another new transport secretary in place, common sense will prevail and customer facing ticket staff will be retained. **RM**

Transport for the South East's grand plan: vision, or pie in the sky?

Over the past four years, a number of consultants and civil servants have spent a vast amount of time putting together a framework which aims to 'achieve a modern, integrated and sustainable transport network for the South East'. Launched in June 2022, the result is Transport for the South East's 'Strategic Investment Plan'. Covering an area from Hampshire to Kent (excluding London), it asks what packages of investment and policies covering all methods of transport should be implemented in the period up to 2050.

Respondents to the consultation on the plan were asked to assess it under a number of headings:

- Decarbonisation and environment
- Adapting to a new normal
- Levelling up left behind communities
- Regeneration and growth
- World class transit system
- East-west connectivity
- Resilient radial corridors
- Global gateways and freight

Bizarrely, you are asked to decide which of these were important, and which not. We argued that all should be taken into account when assessing the value of any particular investment, but that our own remit would prioritise resilient radial corridors (service reliability), East-West connectivity (access to Gatwick), Levelling up communities (ramps at Hildenborough and Edenbridge).

For the purposes of analysis, the whole region was divided into four areas, in only one of which (Kent – from the Tonbridge mainline eastwards) we had a direct interest. However, there were some references in the Sussex area to 'Wealden Line enhancements', which if they improved the service

from stations such as Ashurst and Eridge, could relieve pressure on the Tonbridge main line.

The Kent rail packages we supported were the Bakerloo line extension to Hayes (to reduce pressure on lines into Charing Cross/Cannon Street), Access from Kent to Gatwick and SE 'Mainline Chislehurst-Tonbridge capacity enhancements' (not described). We felt that some other ideas, such as integrating the stations at Maidstone and Canterbury, were also of interest. Other Kent modal packages we supported were bus 'enhancements' in Sevenoaks and Tonbridge /Tonbridge Wells, and dualling of the A21 between Kippings Cross and Lamberhurst.

Although all the packages were costed, it must be stressed that many of these 'blue sky' ideas are still at the conceptual stage, lack funding commitments, and that any figures which may have been posted must be regarded as rudimentary.

Finally, several so-called Global Policy Interventions were proposed. Of these we supported Control of public transport fares, Road user charging (if used to achieve this), and Modal integration.

We believe a considerable problem in achieving these aims will be the issue of alleged over-investment in the South East, and the paper spends much effort in justifying this.

So, has this expense of many years' efforts been worthwhile? The pandemic's 'damping' effect on peak-time travel volumes has certainly relieved pressure on radial transport capacity, but we believe it is important that unbiased experts can judge the value of competing investment and other packages in improving passenger travel. **LS**

eTickets are here, but not necessarily for your journey

Southeastern has recently launched ‘eTickets’ across most of the network. Unlike a paper ticket, or a ticket loaded on to the Key Smartcard, eTickets have a 2D barcode that can either be printed or shown on a phone. Although eTickets have been commonplace on other operators, especially long-distance ones such as Avanti or LNER, they have only just made their way to Southeastern. This delay is nothing to do with Southeastern, however, and instead down to the Department for Transport’s ticketing strategy – which previously prioritised Smartcards over eTickets as the preferred ‘digital ticketing’ approach for commuter-focused operators such as Southeastern.

In theory, all that a passenger needs in order to buy an eTicket is a smartphone or a printer – avoiding the need to queue at a machine, ticket office, or to wait for Southeastern to send you a Smartcard in the post. In practice, however, if you try and buy an eTicket between Tonbridge and London, or even Tonbridge and Paddock Wood, you cannot. For eTickets to work at stations with ticket barriers, the barriers need to be upgraded with barcode readers. Thus, if your journey starts from or finishes at a station with barriers that have yet to be upgraded, you will not be able to buy an eTicket. Southeastern was expecting to complete the rollout at all stations by early 2023, but this has now slipped to “Summer 2023”. eTickets also cannot be used on any journeys that cross London, as TfL’s ticket barriers cannot read them.

Despite the limited rollout, I recently made a journey using an eTicket by buying a ticket from Hildenborough to Rye and starting my journey (as is permitted) at Tonbridge. The ticket barriers have not been upgraded at Tonbridge yet, but in theory I should have shown my eTicket to a member of staff for validation. Unfortunately, both outwards and return the barriers were open and so I could not test this. My only ticket checking experience was on the Southern service to Rye, where the guard simply looked at the barcode without scanning it!

Farewell to First Class on Southeastern

At the start of its new timetable on 11 December, Southeastern will be removing First Class. It says this is to “create an inclusive railway which provides access to more seats for our mainline customers”. The change has been mooted for some

Compared to other operators, I did not find the purchase experience as smooth as it could be. Although purchasing using Southeastern’s app is a simple case of selecting “eTicket” as the delivery option instead of collecting from a machine or loading on to a Smartcard, the app itself cannot display the ticket. Instead, you must wait a minute or so for the ticket to be emailed to you – and then use a different app to display it (e.g., Apple Wallet or a PDF reader) or print it. The disconnect between the purchase of the ticket and the display of it is bound to confuse some, especially those who are used to a more integrated experience!

Given the current availability and usability drawbacks, it may seem foolhardy to be rolling out eTickets. However, on other operators who have offered them for some time they have become very popular – especially with leisure travellers. The best ticket/payment method is the one you already have. Just as TfL saw benefits from offering Contactless payment in addition to Oyster cards, other rail operators have seen eTickets as a much more popular option than queuing for a ticket office or machine, or waiting days for a Smartcard to be sent in the post. With a wider rollout and improvements to usability, we may soon see wider adoption on Southeastern – with leisure travellers and time-pressed commuters being big beneficiaries.

eTickets are ultimately a change in the medium upon which a ticket is offered, and a new way of obtaining a ticket. Despite their availability, they do not render obsolete ticket offices or machines – for many passengers will continue to lack access to or be unable to use the relevant technology. Should today’s paper tickets eventually be phased out, we would fully expect ticket offices and machines to print these 2D barcoded eTickets instead of the current magnetic stripe paper tickets – to do otherwise would significantly disadvantage a significant number of rail users.

KJ

time, and passengers will have differing views on it largely depending on whether they use First Class. At TLC we’re somewhat agnostic about the matter, but at least it will put an end to arguments about when to declassify First Class on busy trains! **JM**

Buses - Timetables may not be all that we lose

For some time, we have been concerned by the lack of accurate information about the times of local buses. While most bus companies appear to have ceased providing paper timetables, the major operator, Arriva, had also apparently given up keeping timetables at bus stops up to date. This might have been understandable when services were changing every few months, but by June this year posted timetables for routes such as 218/9 and 402 were three years out of date, during which time frequencies had been markedly reduced.

We arranged a meeting with Arriva representatives on 30 June to make our case but were surprised to find that the person charged with the task of posting timetables was responsible for virtually the whole of South-East England. He made the point that Arriva timetables, unlike other operators, are stop-specific, and are thus more labour-intensive. We countered, however, that travellers who have alternative transport options are quick to give up waiting for a bus if it does not arrive when expected. It was noticeable that within a week posted timetables had been corrected. However, the value of this may now be negated by current problems with strikes at local garages. We hope Arriva bears

in mind that many of their passengers have no alternative transport available.

The past six months have also been overshadowed by KCC's avowed need to save £2.2m on their 2022/3 budget for supported bus services. To achieve this, they identified 48 subsidy contracts mainly covering rural routes across the county for potential withdrawal for the end of October 2022. Most served villages and towns in the east of Kent, but a small number serve Tonbridge. The most familiar route was 208, which runs from East Peckham through Tonbridge to Pembury. However, this route may now survive, as it serves Pembury Hospital. On the other hand, Autocar's Saturday journeys to Borough Green on Route 222, and its weekday departure at 1756, together with Route 299, which runs once a week from Tonbridge to Tenterden, may not.

Recent meetings of KCC have expressed concern at the loss of services provided specially for the disabled, and these may escape the axe. However, it looks at present that most of the remaining ordinary services in the proposal will have disappeared by Christmas. LS

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

As elected at the AGM your Committee are:

Chairman and Membership Secretary:	John Morton	Vice Chairman and Newsletter Editor:	Kingsley Jarrett
Hon. Secretary and Press Secretary:	Robert Mansfield	Hon. Treasurer:	Lionel Shields
Committee Members:	Philip Gale, Zak Darwood and Laura Hillier		

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, have now returned 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. To renew simply [visit our website](#) and pay by **PayPal**, **BACS** or **cheque** Our BACS details are:

Account Name: TONBRIDGE & DIST RAILWAY TRAVELLERS ASS TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

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