



Travel Topics

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



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Redhill to Tonbridge Line: Significant cuts to services averted by TLC

No changes until December 2023, with small reductions thereafter. Key school services protected.

During the course of the past few weeks, we have been in intense discussions with GTR, parent company to Southern Rail, who operate the service between Tonbridge and Redhill, a line with which we have recently become more involved following our adoption of Leigh, Penshurst and Edenbridge at last year's AGM.

GTR had previously indicated to us their concern about the need to make company-wide economies, and that the Tonbridge 'branch' needed to share in these. In this connection they had shared with us proposals which saw a major reduction in the current shuttle service between Redhill and Tonbridge at certain times to a less than hourly service. More importantly, the proposals gave no consideration to the line's key user group (school students), or the potential of the line to provide a link between Kent and Gatwick Airport. After reviewing and condemning the GTR proposals as effectively mothballing the line, we compiled a new service pattern which respected GTR's need to reduce costs but retained the majority of services, including school time services, and introduced direct services from Tonbridge to Gatwick Airport via Redhill.

Our proposals link to longstanding ambitions across the Southeast to improve connectivity and make better use of available infrastructure. Above all they protect the key user group of the line, school students travelling between Edenbridge and Tonbridge, whilst making better use of the rolling stock and available connections. The proposals were fully worked up, including train wait times, connections with other services, gap utilisations within other service patterns and available platforms at Gatwick and stations across the

proposed route, therefore giving GTR little room for outright rejection.

We submitted our proposals to GTR and in a subsequent meeting at the beginning of April GTR showed us a new timetable proposal effectively incorporating virtually all our suggestions. They invited comments and stressed that no changes would be introduced before December 2023 at the earliest. We were somewhat surprised that, instead of rejecting the Gatwick extension out of hand, they stated that they were 'working on a proposal which could potentially be extended to Gatwick in the future' and put forward some hurdles which included funding the service. We do not see the issue of funding being a main detractor for the extended service, as the line would see a significant growth in users from across Kent and would be attractive to Kent County Council, Surrey County Council and the operators of Gatwick Airport. Furthermore, we believe the commuter base exists, the support exists, and that the route is viable, therefore we will be pushing GTR to introduce this service as soon as practically possible.

Subsequently, GTR have confirmed publicly at a stakeholder event on the 27th March that there will be no changes to the Redhill to Tonbridge service before December.

TLC will continue to advocate on behalf of the line as a lifeline for those communities that it serves, as well as those more widely potentially benefitting. We believe that without the improved service, and the consequent increase in passenger numbers, the line will continue to be a candidate for cuts and will wither away – harming those who depend upon it today and a lost opportunity for others. **ZD**

New Southeastern timetable causes major challenges

In the last issue of *Travel Topics*, we outlined Southeastern's plans for a major overhaul of its timetable. The December 2022 timetable is now in place and passengers can judge for themselves whether Southeastern's masterplan has worked or not. As we reported, that masterplan was created without input from passengers. With agreement from the Department for Transport, Southeastern decided not to hold a consultation. It has cited some weak arguments for not consulting, including that timetables are regularly changing in the post-Covid era (no longer true, we are now back two timetable changes a year) and that it would take too long to consult (we think the old timetable could have easily served until May 2023).

So, has the new timetable been a success? Our experience has been decidedly mixed. Initially it was hard to judge due to numerous infrastructure problems alongside industrial action. Since then, a picture has emerged of a timetable which is just about standing up, but which has very little room for failure. Social media has been awash with scenes of overcrowding at London Bridge at times of disruption. The new timetable sees most metro services running from a single London terminal, either Charing Cross or Cannon Street, rather than each line having direct trains from both terminals. This results in much larger numbers of passengers changing at London Bridge. It is fine when things are going well, but any disruption tends to lead to large and chaotic crowds at London Bridge. The concentration on one terminal per a line has been something Southeastern has wanted to do for years, but passengers rejected it in every consultation. Maybe we are now seeing why listening to passengers has some value.

We raised several specific concerns about the timetable. These included the lack of services from Hildenborough at around 07:30 in the morning peak, the addition of Orpington stops in the rush hour and the curtailment of the Medway Valley line at Paddock Wood. We received a response from Southeastern with many words but little substance. Every argument we made was rebutted with variations of "there is no money now we're funded by taxpayers" or "we know best about timetables". This represents a disappointing change in thinking. In former times Southeastern took on board our feedback and often made changes. It seems the days of Southeastern working constructively with passengers are largely over, at least for now.

We did have one victory, concerning the time of the first off-peak train from Tonbridge. In the old timetable the first train from Tonbridge qualifying for an off-peak return to London was the 09:09, which had 12 coaches. In the new timetable this train became the 09:07 and was cut to just 8 coaches, leading to severe overcrowding. Southeastern has now converted a former 08:54 departure to Cannon Street into an 09:05 departure to Charing Cross, making off-peak returns to London valid on this train (the 09:07 has been retimed back to 09:09). The 09:05 starts from Tonbridge, using Platform 4, and therefore has lots of seats on departure. As I write this article comfortably seated on the 09:05, I can confirm I am grateful for the change!

Southeastern has stated that the current timetable is now the basis for future timetables. It claims to be willing to listen to feedback but is refusing to restore timetable consultations. We are concerned that all future changes will be based on a fundamentally flawed timetable. The timetable has "core" mainline departures from Charing Cross (the pairs of Hastings and Ashford trains each hour) departing at uneven intervals whereas these services should be timed to run with 15 minutes between each departure (at Charing Cross, and at Tonbridge in both directions). Southeastern suggests that the current uneven intervals at off-peak times may one day be obviated by restoring the running of Tunbridge Wells - Charing Cross round trips throughout the day, but we do not know whether demand or Government funding will ever allow this. That said, demand is picking up. It feels like the current timetable is just only just providing the capacity needed and we are uncertain as to what levels of demand would prompt the Government to allow Southeastern to restore more services.

The May 2023 timetable will be a roll over from the December 2022 timetable with only minor changes. Given the current financial pressures we might expect to see some reductions in train lengths, perhaps on days of the week when demand is lower. The new 09:05 service is being retimed to 09:03 and will originate from Tunbridge Wells (therefore using Platform 2 rather than Platform 4 at Tonbridge). It will also unfortunately gain a stop at Orpington. It is disappointing to see Southeastern once again failing to run a consultation, but we will keep up the pressure to have a timetable that works for passengers.

JM

Hildenborough Station Development – an accident waiting to happen

Normally investment would be heralded and celebrated, especially at Hildenborough when all we seem to get is service cuts, second rate service during disruption and the ongoing uncertainty over ticket office staffing. Regular followers of our social media feeds will know that I get very excited when the ticket office is open and serving passengers!

Sadly, I cannot get excited about the recent developments in the car park. They have been conducted to 'industry standards' and all the relevant bodies have signed off the plans at certain stages. They just did not bother contacting the local rail user group (we have been here since 1959!) and, from what I can tell, I do not even think they even attended the site until our intervention. A lot of the features seem designed to tick boxes rather than serve the needs of the station. For example, the 4 drop-off bays we are being provided with could easily be filled 5 times over on a 'normal' evening.

We had requested the plans from Southeastern and received no response. We were then alerted to the installation of a cycle rack just inside the station's grounds (immediately following the turn off from Rings Hill). I could not quite believe the picture I was sent at first, as it is such an illogical and downright dangerous place to put a cycle rack. Anyone who has used this station will know that cars zip round that virtually blind corner and so it does not take a genius, or highly paid industry consultant, to know that this is a recipe for disaster. There were no safety measures around the rack. No warning signs, no markings, no traffic calming measures, no bollards.

We raised this as an urgent concern with Southeastern who responded they would 'look into it'. A couple of days passed with no word and following our committee meeting, we decided to post a safety warning on our social media channels. It went out on 1st April and so in a sign of how incredulous this location is, a couple of people did ask whether this was actually an April Fools. Despite this, the internet did its thing and word spread quickly, which hopefully helped prevent an accident from happening.

Southeastern requested a call with us the next working day and on my way into the station I saw a gentleman investigating the cycle rack, so I introduced myself to him. He was a safety officer



The initial location of the bike rack - on a blind corner as you turn in to the station car park!

from Southeastern looking at how to make it safe. We spoke for about 15-20 minutes and he identified many of the concerns that we and our members had raised, including just how far the top rack extends. When using the top rack, you are effectively in the opposite lane and so this is wildly inappropriate for the location. In a subsequent call with Southeastern, we got the news that it was to be removed and the plans were to be sent to me, but that the intention was to install safety measures and to reinstate the cycle rack in the same location at a later stage!

We then received partial copies of the plan. Focusing on a small area, it ignored most of the car park proper. Conscious of the tight turnaround before the Easter weekend we worked hard on analysing and documenting our concerns. Less than three days later, we sent an 18-page report containing 12 recommendations that we thought were needed to make this scheme a success. Four of these recommendations were alternate locations for the cycle rack as we could not see how the chosen location could ever be safe without drastically limiting the flow of traffic to the station. Given the time constraints, we limited our recommendations to things that we thought were possible to change at this late stage and would have the largest impact, without breaking the budget.

This is an evolving item for us and by the time you read this, everything may have changed for the better. Hildenborough station is well-placed for cycling from the village, and it would be a shame for this infrastructure to go unused, and cause harm, due to the illogical and dangerous placement. We hope that our recommendations will be taken on board but fear we will be ignored.

RM

Flexi season tickets and the phantom discount

On 5 March 2023 rail fares rose by 5.9%. The Government was keen to emphasise that this was significantly below the prevailing rate of inflation, but still the rise is challenging for passengers in the current cost of living crisis.

One way in which passengers are trying to keep costs down is by continuing to commute to work only two or three days a week and working from home on the remaining days. However, the current fares system does not provide good value for this pattern of commuting. Flexi season tickets were introduced in June 2021 and require you to buy eight return tickets up front and use them within 28 days. The discount is fairly modest and any change of plans can leave you unable to use all the tickets within the allotted time period. On our website we describe how you can save money compared to a day peak return by buying two singles and using a Network Railcard to cut the cost of the “return” leg. This provides a discount which is fairly close that gained from a flexi season ticket and avoids the inflexibility of so-called flexi season tickets. For reference, a peak return from Tonbridge to Charing Cross will normally cost you £37.10. By using the “two singles with Network Railcard” approach you can bring this down to £33.20 – close to the price of a flexi season ticket at £30.63 per return trip.

We’ve been campaigning for some time for the 28 day validity period of flexi season tickets to be extended but we have hit a brick wall. Southeastern claims that “longer validity carries a fraud risk” but has not spelt out why. Tom Tugendhat MP has expressed support for reviewing the scheme and making it more like a classic carnet system (which would have a longer validity period). However, the (Westminster) Government is not currently engaging with this idea. ScotRail by comparison offers 15% off a “Flexipass” carnet of 10 single tickets, valid for up to 60 days.

Given the relatively poor value for money of flexi season tickets, back in February 2023 we were delighted to hear that there was a promotion offering a temporary discount on flexi season tickets from Tonbridge and Paddock Wood. However, one of our members wrote to us to say they could not find any discounted tickets and that Southeastern had been unable to help identify any. We queried the point with Southeastern and it

initially gave an ambiguous reply that flexi season tickets offered “great value” and the effect of the promotion was “to make this consistent across all our network during the trial period”. However, it eventually conceded that no discounted fares were available from Tonbridge and Paddock Wood due to “an error in the methodology” and removed these stations from the promotional fares publicity.

It is deeply disappointing that an opportunity to tempt passengers back to the railway was missed. Flexi season tickets could be a real success story for the railway if the Government had the imagination to make them genuinely attractive. Instead, it seems determined to make part-time commuting expensive in the vain hope that people will return to commuting full time. For some, that will be right option, but others will simply find jobs where they can work at home all the time.

If you do commute part-time, it is important to consider your options for fares. If you are going to travel in the rush hour two days a week without fail then a flexi season ticket may work for you. However, if you can travel off-peak at least on some days when it will almost certainly be cheaper to buy daily tickets. As we report elsewhere, the first off-peak train now leaves Tonbridge at 09:05 (to be changed to 09:03 from 22 May), which is quite early. So do consider if your employer will allow you a lie in, or to start your day from home, and thus enjoy a cheaper journey!

We did have one small victory on fares. The new Southeastern timetable features a 09:58 service from Paddock Wood to Charing Cross rather than the 10:01 which used to operate. This change made the service ineligible for super off-peak returns because it departed before 10:00. After one of our members highlighted the problem, we contacted Southeastern and it has now put in place a fares easement which allows passengers to use super off-peak returns on this service. The super off-peak fares were initially sold only at the ticket office but are now also available online. Sadly, Network Railcards cannot be used because the service departs before 10:00. Although easements can be put in place to permit this (as was done previously for the former 09:58 departure from Wadhurst!), sadly Southeastern is unwilling or unable to easily do so in this case.

JM

Strike update – 1 dispute down, 2 to go

I must confess to finding the range of industrial action hard to follow – and that's just considering the railways! It is not helped by a Government strategy that seems to be devoid of communication and relies on lazy union bashing. Our committee, like our members, holds a variety of views on the strikes. Personally, I can see the case from both sides and I'd like to try and understand the issues a bit better. However, neither side are presenting enough information to allow for an informed view.

There is no doubt that the railway needs to improve. The cost base is clearly too high and the infrastructure and trains are not robust enough to allow a decent service. That said, Southeastern staff haven't had a pay rise since 2019 and I have heard similar claims for Network Rail. With the inflation genie well and truly out of the lamp, it seems fair that the workers receive some compensation for keeping the railway going during the pandemic and to protect their living standards. Something must give but it will take someone more intelligent than me to work out how best to do it.

At the time of writing, one of the three outstanding disputes has been settled. This is the RMT dispute with Network Rail and given the constant state of infrastructure failures, could not have come soon enough. Trying to understand what is in the offer is difficult but at face value it seems like there has been a pay increase for very little in return, which makes a mockery of the Government's hard-nosed attitude.

A look back at services in 1906

As railway traffic increased, timetables became an operational necessity for the efficient running of the railway. The invention of the 'train graph', which represented on paper on one axis the time scale for the journey and on the other axis a distance scale representing a specific section of track, was a breakthrough. Lines representing the position and progress of individual trains were plotted on the graph in accordance with the point to point running times to avoid conflicts and aid connections. Modern timetabling software still operates on the same principle.

In October 1906 the South Eastern and Chatham Railway issued a new winter timetable. This included details of train services, information on the company byelaws, and other services from

The one likely to be resolved next is the RMT dispute with 14 train operating companies, including both Southeastern and Southern. This dispute involves the fate of ticket offices, which is a thorny issue, as well as onboard staff such as guards. We strongly believe in having staff available at stations. They do not necessarily have to be based in a ticket office but having a human that can help passengers with questions, ticket purchasing, and safety is invaluable. This is especially true at the smaller stations on our lines.

The trickiest dispute would appear to be with the drivers' union, ASLEF. Much is made in the media of driver's salaries and as a result I suspect public support for this dispute is the lowest of the three. Again the Government's communication strategy makes it difficult to get to the crux of the matter. Mick Whelan, the secretary of ASLEF seems to be less media-savvy than Mick Lynch at the RMT and so other than pay, it is unclear what else is driving this dispute.

For our railway to be a success, we need all parties pulling in the same direction. Staff are possibly the biggest component of that system and so it is not wise to have such bad staff relations. Our advice to the Government would be to be clearer on what you are trying to achieve and set out your plans. It does not feel like there is a plan other than a desperate attempt to make numbers on a spreadsheet balance – something that has not been achieved for many, many years.

RM

refreshments (for example a luncheon basket with claret for 3s, or 15p) to specialist freight services including one for moving 'piano-fortes'. There were three classes for passenger's services – First, Second and Third. A standard First Class Return Fare to London from Tonbridge was 9s (45p), the Second Class Return was 6s6d (33p) and the Third Class Return was 5s1d (25p). In 1908 the average annual national income was £70. Workmen's Tickets for 'Mechanics'. 'Day Labourers' and 'Women Workers' were available on certain suburban routes within London such as the services to Sydenham and Dartford. Season Tickets, however, were restricted to First and Second-Class Passengers. Tonbridge had yet to become a town of mass commuting.

Tonbridge on weekdays, which then included Saturdays, was served by a variety of fast, semi-fast and stopping services. Altogether there were 28 'up trains' from Tonbridge to London via Sevenoaks and 31 'down trains' down from London to Tonbridge by the same route. Between 7 AM and 10 AM eight trains departed for London, the fastest was the 7:35 AM taking 52 minutes to reach Cannon Street, while the 10 AM took 71 minutes to reach Charing Cross. The trains came from a variety of starting points including Ashford, Dover Town, Maidstone West, Tunbridge Wells, and Hawkhurst. There was also a slow stopping service to London via Edenbridge which then joined the Uckfield line at Crowhurst Junction running northwards to London via Oxted.

Services from London followed a similar pattern with the 5 PM stopping service from Charing Cross taking 78 minutes to reach Tonbridge where it terminated; the 5.30 PM to Bexhill West took 56 minutes to reach Tonbridge before running fast from Tunbridge Wells to arrive at Bexhill West Station 59 minutes later, on the now closed branch line from Crowhurst. The 5:37 PM from Charing Cross took 66 minutes to reach Tonbridge and finally terminated at Tunbridge Wells 17 minutes later. The last service out of London was the 11:45 PM from Charing Cross arriving at Tonbridge at

0:47 AM. Sunday services were sparse with only eight to nine trains each way, perhaps reflecting a much more Sabbatarian society, and the first arrival from London was not until 9:27 AM. All these services used steam locomotives, slow by today's standards.

The fastest services, however, generally did not stop at Tonbridge, these were the expresses to and from channel ports which ran from Victoria and Charing Cross and formed a major route to the continent. The 9AM Boat Train from Charing Cross, for First and Second Class passengers only, arrived at Dover Pier Station at 11:05 AM, later arriving (weather permitting) at Gare Du Nord at 4:45 PM local time, a journey time of 6 hours and 50 minutes, compared to 2 hours 16 minutes on today's Eurostar services.

The railway company as a commercial business, albeit heavily regulated, designed their services to secure the best return as they perceived it, although the complexity of railways operations probably made it difficult to discern which services were profitable and which were not. The 1906 timetable served the needs of Edwardian passengers, and Tonbridge Line Commuters campaigns for better rail services to meet the needs of today's passengers.

PG

TONBRIDGE LINE COMMUTERS

As elected at the previous AGM your Committee are:

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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

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