



Travel Topics

Issue 138

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



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The dire state of today's railway

The past few months have been punctuated by industrial disputes, infrastructure failures and a train service increasingly under strain. It would seem uncontroversial to say that these all stem from the Government. Their view would be that the railway loses significant amounts of money and reform is needed. We do not disagree that reform is needed, we are sure there are lots of examples where things could be done better or in a more long-term cost-effective manner. By the same token we are not sure that the Government is achieving either of those. Most of the costs of the railway are fixed and so we would advocate growing so that the cost base is spread amongst more passengers, rather than trying to shrink the cost base to fit the customer base. We are not sure that there are many railway networks across that world that turn a profit and yet there are many non-financial benefits to running a rail network and so a literal spreadsheet showing money in, and money out will never see the railway fare well.

We saw services cut (December 2022) and whilst the timetable has barely coped, numbers have trended upwards and increasingly, we are seeing more overcrowding on our trains. The December 2023 changes introduced more trains in service, we were not sure if it is enough to change the story. The June 2024 changes seem to improve evening trains and marginally increased Cannon Street services, which we have long called for.

There have been three separate industrial disputes running this year. Thankfully, 2 have been resolved but ASLEF, the driver's union remains in dispute. It appears to be a political tactic to drag these disputes out and we find ourselves in a difficult position. The Government playbook is that offers have been made to the unions, but the union management won't allow them to be put to the

members to vote. The unions highlight concerns over job losses and safety. As ever the truth is somewhere in the middle. In the event of a complete deadlock, we would call for the Government to publish the deal they have put to the unions. If it is reasonable then it will put pressure on the union to accept. If it is not, then we will get to find out what this dispute is genuinely about. Until then, we are left in the dark and people tend to take a position based on their tribal political views.

One of the more concerning effects of the RMT Network Rail industrial dispute was how bad the infrastructure got. For a while, it seemed to be a daily occurrence that a signal or power supply would fail, and we think it shows just how much our rail network relies on the goodwill of our engineers, going above and beyond their duty to keep things moving. If we are right, this is not a healthy position to be in. There is lots of ageing infrastructure and Network Rail have called for more money to improve this (citing climate change), but the current Government seem keen to keep costs at a minimum and so this is a potential warning flag for performance and potentially safety. We are eagerly awaiting news on the replacement for the Networker trains, which had gone very quiet until Southeastern announced that there are 5 companies being invited to tender.

Looking forward, one thing that is generating lots of interest is the new pay as you go zone that extended to Sevenoaks. This involves single leg pricing, which we are generally in favour of as a way of simplifying the system, but it appears to be creating, or at least the enforcement of, an evening peak. The lack of contactless fares means that this has not been handled well and we are working with Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association (SRTA) to resolve this before it reaches us.

RM

AGM report, and a call for support

11 May 2023 saw our 65th AGM, which saw us report a small decline in membership, but numbers have held up reasonably well given the change to remote working. We would of course love to have more members to help us drive change. Sadly, we saw our former Chair, John Morton step down after many years on the Committee. We wish him well for the future. Rob Mansfield has stepped up to be Chair. In terms of capacity, we are much reduced by these changes at a time when our workload is significantly enhanced. If we cannot find new committee

members who have the time to help, we will need to reduce the scope of our activities. You may have noticed that Travel Topics missed an issue, and this is because of the competing priorities life throws at us. We are working on ways of becoming leaner and more effective, but we cannot escape that we need more help. If you would like to have an informal chat about potentially helping us out on the committee, please get in touch with me (robert.mansfield@tonbridgecommuters.org.uk). I would love to hear from you. **RM**

Ticket Office Closures dropped following widespread objections

Last year, 974 ticket offices were proposed for closure across the rail network to allegedly “provide a better service at a lower cost”. While the train operators and the Rail Delivery Group were the public face of this proposal, it was ultimately being driven by the Government who now control most train operators either directly or via management contracts.

It is not easy to close a ticket office. Their operation forms part of a contractual obligation, and thus to close them a public consultation must be undertaken. While Southeastern only opened consultations on an initial “phase 1” targeting 40 stations within the metro area, it was clear that later phases would have an adverse impact on many of our local stations - with only Sevenoaks and Tonbridge likely to retain ticket offices under the guise of new “Travel Centres”.

We considered it highly likely that if the “phase 1” closures were approved, the momentum behind them would make it more difficult to oppose later phases. Thus, we objected to the changes on a wide range of grounds. While some of the purported changes may seem beneficial to some passengers, we were especially concerned about the impacts on those with additional needs and were sceptical that this would result in improvements for most passengers. Passengers overwhelmingly value visible and approachable staff at stations, regardless of if they are in a ticket office or elsewhere. While ticket offices have contractual obligations around staffing levels and hours, there did not appear to be the same level of protection for this new “multi-skilled” role –

making it easy to de-staff stations entirely with no recourse. Our full consultation response can be viewed on our website.

We were far from the only group to object to this proposal. Overall, more than 750,000 responses to the consultation were received from groups and individuals – of which 99% objected to the changes. Depending on the operator involved, these responses went to the transport watchdogs London Travelwatch or Transport Focus. These watchdogs then applied their own scrutiny to the proposals and ultimately objected to them as well. In the case of Southeastern, London Travelwatch objected to the proposals on many grounds – including concerns over the quality of service that would be provided, how further changes to staff might be made, and even a lack of confidence in the industry’s claims that this would result in an improvement to cost effectiveness.

Thankfully, on 31 October the plans were formally dropped by the Government in an abrupt U-turn – despite industry sources claiming that the plans had already been signed off by civil servants and ministers. We can only conclude that the sheer public opposition to the plans, as well as likely legal challenges, made them untenable.

Ultimately, we and many others are glad to see that these plans have been dropped. While there is always a risk that a future Government will attempt to revive these plans, we can only hope that they take onboard the wealth of feedback which was provided on the consultations and do not attempt to repeat the same mistakes. **KJ**

Travelcards saved – with a small price-rise

Previously, Transport for London proposed axing Day Travelcards. TfL's rationale for axing this was to help with plugging their funding gap due to reduced post-pandemic travel patterns and a reduction in Government funding.

While this would have been of minimal impact to those living within London's fare zones, for commuters and day-trippers heading into London by train this would have imposed a harsh financial penalty as the extra cost of a ticket including a travelcard is less than the equivalent fare cap.

For example, using December 2023 fares an off-peak day return from Tonbridge to London costs £20.90 – but adding on a travelcard increases this to £25.50 (£4.60 extra). Single fares within Zone 1 cost £2.80 during the peak, or £2.70 during off-peak periods – so even making just 2 journeys within Zone 1 saves money with a travelcard. Importantly, an off-peak travelcard also applies during the evenings – unlike TfL's normal fares and daily caps. Furthermore, travellers holding a railcard can also discount the fare by 1/3 – making the prior example with a travelcard cost just £3.05 extra!

Hildenborough Station developments

We are all for improvements to our facilities and welcome when money is invested in them. Unfortunately, in Hildenborough's case, Southeastern decided to plough a lone furrow and have made a bit of a mess with it.

The forecourt of the station has been significantly adjusted, and now allows for an entrance and an exit to the car park as opposed to the single in-out. There is now ample room for buses to turn around.

There are a few features and the overall execution of the scheme that have left a lot to be desired. We have been engaging with Southeastern on this, but they have resisted many of our approaches and dragged their feet, which was a missed opportunity.

Our biggest complaint was the location of a cycle rack. Its original dangerous location was just inside the entrance, disrupting traffic flow on a blind corner. We raised the issue on social media and circulated it as far and wide as possible and after the weekend, the cycle rack was removed.

Given that the financial impact to those living within London's fare zones would be minimal, many felt that it was highly likely that this proposal would be implemented.

Thankfully, following talks between TfL, the Rail Delivery Group (representing train operators like Southeastern) and the Department for Transport, an agreement has been reached which will mean travelcards continue to remain available – albeit with a one-off average price-rise of 3% from March 2024 on top of the general fares increase. Although any increase in fares is disappointing given the current cost-of-living struggles many face, this increase is still significantly less than what many would have to pay if travelcards were axed. We suspect that as part of this agreement, there are other financial agreements in the background (for example, revenue-split adjustments between train operators and TfL), but if so, these have not been made public.

Regardless, this agreement is a welcome relief for commuters and leisure travellers alike who travel onwards within London!

KJ



The new position of the cycle rack at Hildenborough station

How this passed any sort of assessment is unknown. We are very grateful that nobody was hurt because of this stupidity. Thankfully due to our intervention, the cycle rack has been placed in a much safer location. We are aware that some cyclists are unhappy with the type of rack (requiring significant strength to place your bike on the upper rack) and the lack of protection from the elements, but sadly that ship had sailed, and we focused on preserving life.

The pathway between the station car park and Cinnamon Square has now become a parking space, which is especially daft as there is an odd gap at the end of the row that is walkway size and so had someone shown a bit of initiative, we could have retained the popular cut through. We have made representations on this to Southeastern and they were receptive but some months on, nothing has happened. There are a few car parking spots that are at a very strange incline and so it seems unlikely that anyone will use them, unless they have a particular desire to test their handbrake and hill start techniques! Again, we have made recommendations on this, but they seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

Since we raised the issue of the deathtrap cycle rack, progress on the scheme has stalled. This is a particular shame because there are no road markings or signs on the new roadways and so it

Timetable Changes

We are seeing a pattern return of twice-yearly timetable changes in June and December.

We'll start with Southern as that is easy. There are no changes with the Tonbridge to Redhill line, aside from a very minor retiming of two evening trains to depart a few minutes later.

With Southeastern, there are a quite a few changes, most which we have called for. Paddock Wood services are retimed to allow better connections with the Medway Valley Line. This is of course only required because Southeastern are determined to keep the Medway Valley Line from Tonbridge and so there are very few natural connections. Better connections are certainly welcome, but we remain unconvinced that passengers would not be better served by the Medway Valley Line continuing into Tonbridge as previously. We will be raising this with Southeastern as we can see no evidence of the improved performance they cited as a reason for changing to terminate at Paddock Wood instead.

Hildenborough seems to be a big winner in these timetable changes. In the morning rush hour, we now have 4 trains between 7 and 8 with a combination of Cannon Street and Charing Cross destinations. This feels much more like the pre-Covid service, including the trains in short succession! If only the 200 commuter bus was also being restored! We welcome the Cannon Street services, as one of the most frequently

has become a bit of a free for all, wasting the potential of the scheme. Apparently, the delay is down to Network Rail needing to be able to close the road to paint the road and there is some difficulty in achieving this, which seems far-fetched, but we have yet to get a better response.

We have had lots of comments about the number of disabled bays and whilst we sympathise that this is a shame because it's very difficult to use the station if you have any sort of mobility issue, legislation requires a certain percentage of bays to be accessible. We take the view that this is one step in what will likely be a winding journey to our stations being accessible, which is our aim.

We will do our best to make the scheme work but we call on Southeastern to work with us rather than trying to do it all themselves. **RM**

asked questions we get is around the lack of Cannon Street services. Southeastern take the view that you can simply change at London Bridge, but our experience suggests people would rather stay on a train than change. London Bridge is also not the quickest or easiest station to change at. A 10:34 morning service gives a boost to those using the Network Rail card as previously they had to wait 51 minutes to take advantage of the post 10am discounts. Ideally, we would like a train shortly after 10 for this reason. A local bugbear has been the lack of evening trains and so socialites of Hildenborough can enjoy a more regular service later in the evening.

Tonbridge gains too with improved frequency. As a point of principle, we would like to see a clockface timetable as passengers can be habitual and it is a faff to check your journey each time. Regrettably, this was lost in the big timetable reboot, but we take solace in the improvements meaning you will not have to wait long for a train.

The next timetable change is set for December 2024 and Southeastern are hopeful that they will get funding to allow more trains to be added. Initial signs suggest that there may not be any changes in our area but if needed, we will make the case. We are approaching a general election, and it is possible that we will get a change of Government and so it would be wise to assume the timetable is subject to change.

We were sceptical about Southeastern's timetable reboot but from our point of view, we think it has gone reasonably well, although the performance increase has only been marginal. There have been some significant issues elsewhere on the network, but we have largely avoided those. The incremental changes we have seen here are generally positive but the finances in the railway are so tight that there have been instances of robbing Peter to pay Paul. We are in a catch 22 situation that the only way we are likely to get

more money, to allow more services, is for there to be such demand that people are cramped, and the data overwhelmingly calls for further trains. This is not a pleasant experience and with fares ever increasing, it is not doing a lot to attract passengers to the railway. It does feel like commuters are coming back more regularly and we will have to hold Southeastern and the Government to task on making sure that demand and supply are balanced so that the railway is attractive for passengers. **RM**

Redhill – Now on to Gatwick?

Members will recall we reported in the last 'Travel Topics' our success in persuading Southern of the value of the Redhill - Tonbridge line, particularly about the retention of the all-important school services. As promised, the changes we suggested were implemented in December.

Meanwhile, Network Rail have set up a new group with the aim of improving connections between Kent and Gatwick Airport. We passed on to this group our ideas of extending the Redhill trains to Gatwick, and even, at the Kent end, to Strood (both of which we believe can be achieved at marginal cost). This group has now produced a report outlining the strategic case for restoring direct services from Kent to Gatwick Airport.

The report highlighted how the demand for rail travel to Gatwick from Kent is poorly met today and set out a range of options to address this – including our proposed extension of the existing Tonbridge to Redhill shuttle service to Gatwick. Other options included direct services from Maidstone and Ashford. Of these options, only the extension of the Tonbridge to Redhill shuttle

was estimated to recover in full the additional costs involved with running it. This cost analysis assumed however that 3 trains would be used to provide the service, whereas our previous analysis demonstrated that it would be possible to provide this service with just 2 trains.

Overall, the report concludes that direct services from Tonbridge to Gatwick would be "strategically valuable", but that further detailed analysis is needed to confirm their viability. The report notes that the extension of the existing shuttle could be used to demonstrate the feasibility of the service before the more "ambitious and expensive" options of direct services from Maidstone or Ashford are considered. The report therefore recommends that the extension proposal is progressed once the current timetable beds in, and finances stabilise.

We are thrilled that Network Rail's analysis in this report confirms that there is a significant unmet demand and that there are viable options to meet this which should be progressed. We'll keep fighting so watch this space! **LS & KJ**

Tonbridge's First Railway: The History of the Redhill to Tonbridge Line

The recent timetable changes on the Tonbridge to Redhill underline that this is a useful east to west cross-country route which is vulnerable to service cuts and has become a withered arm of the Southern franchise, whose busiest traffic are pupils attending Tonbridge schools: a route that has seen a steady deterioration of passenger services over the last 15 years, with through trains to London and Gatwick Airport withdrawn and reduced to a shuttle service between Tonbridge and Redhill.

The current attenuated state of passenger services belies the line's history as the first railway to reach Tonbridge in 1842. The London and South Eastern Railway sharing London Bridge as the London terminus had powers over the London and Brighton Railway as far as Redhill and constructed a route 45 miles across the Weald to Ashford via Tonbridge, which served as the main line to London for 26 years. In 1868 a more direct route to London was opened through Chislehurst and Sevenoaks and became the main line to London, but the Redhill line remained a

significant route, particularly for passenger and freight traffic avoiding London.

The line's subsequent history was relatively uneventful; in 1884 a spur was built to provide a link to the newly opened line from Hurst Green via Lingfield to Ashurst Junction, which today forms the Uckfield branch. For many years, a train service operated to London via Hurst Green and Croydon, and the spur was finally closed in 1965. In 1911 "Lyghe Halt" opened, eventually renamed Leigh. The route played a crucial role in the Second World War, as one of "Alternative Routes for Traffic Across the River Thames" for directing traffic around London; it played a major part in the movement of troops evacuated from Dunkirk and for wartime freight traffic, and the current sidings west of Tonbridge were built to accommodate this traffic in 1942.

The route was not included in the "Kent Coast Electrification Scheme", completed in 1962. The infamous Beeching Report proposed the closure of the intermediate stations, which was not pursued in part due to strong public pressure to retain them. However, the stations were subsequently de-staffed, and their buildings demolished, to be replaced by small shelters. Steam was replaced with diesel in January 1965, and operated a Tonbridge to Reading Service. In 1994 the route was electrified and in 1999

benefited from an hourly service to Maidstone West, and an hourly service from London Bridge to Tunbridge Wells via Redhill.

The line has suffered from changing franchise operators, and perhaps also from being on the periphery of Kent and Surrey, from not being championed by any leading local authority. Since 2018 it has become largely a shuttle service between Redhill and Tonbridge.

The railway system is continually evolving, and individual lines have always responded to changing flows of traffic and operating constraints and routes change their role, but it is the view of TLC that this line has become a Cinderella service whose potential is neglected, and which is ripe for improved services in the future. It remains a vital local service of social need in an area of poor roads and bus services, but as the Kent County Council's 2021 Rail Strategy recognised, there is a strategic need for a new regional rail service that would link together the counties of south-east England outside Greater London with each other and with Gatwick Airport. Although no longer a main line the Tonbridge to Redhill route could with suitable investment enhance the public transport connectivity of the region and help to meet the needs of the growing population of the communities it serves.

PG

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