

West Midlands

By Peter Cousins
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LOCAL ACTION

December timetables

The branch was pleased to welcome many of the changes in the December local timetable. Funding support from Centro and Cannock Chase District Council has enabled the diesel multiple unit service from Walsall to Cannock and Rugeley to be upgraded to half-hourly and extended later into the evening. London Midland has also plugged the gaps in the service to Hereford which, following changes to First Great Western timings, now has an hourly service from Birmingham for most of the day. Despite strong campaigns by both local authorities and user groups to retain the previous hourly stop, Virgin West Coast services no longer call at Nuneaton for most of the day.

Rugby has also lost most of its direct service to the North West. These changes effectively remove any viable connection from both these towns and the East Midlands to the North West by the direct Trent Valley route.

Passengers are now left with the option of either taking the local all-stations service to Crewe or changing at New Street. We can only hope that empty seats on the Pendolinos will prompt a change of heart among Virgin's management.

One other downside of the timetable changes has been the need to schedule local services in the West Midlands around the new three trains per hour Virgin West Coast timings to Birmingham. This has, for instance, resulted in a very uneven interval service on the busy route to Telford and Shrewsbury.

Infill electrification

The branch was pleased to read that the Rail Regulator has approved funding for the plan to extend the Cross-City electrification down the Lickey Incline to Bromsgrove. Unfortunately, at the start of the year, full funding for the new station itself had not been assembled. Several routes in the West Midlands are candidates for "follow on" electrification with the busy Walsall-Rugeley line having a strong case.

Birmingham New Street station

Preparatory work on the New Street station Gateway development is planned to start in 2009. The first phase of the project will see improved access to platform 12 – which currently has just a single staircase – and the useful Navigation Street footbridge extended to reach this platform. These changes are intended to provide additional platform capacity while the other island platforms are sequentially upgraded. The project to upgrade the station's passenger facilities will take three years.

Regional rail strategy

Work on a draft regional rail strategy, covering the next 20 years, is in progress, and a consultation should be published early in 2009. Local rail user groups have already submitted ideas and aspirations. As part of our response, the branch is likely to draw attention to the need for more parking spaces on all the main commuter routes in the region and are likely to suggest that a minimum service of three trains per hour is now needed on several more routes in the Birmingham commuting area – including the lines to Shrewsbury, Tamworth and Leicester which carry commuters from beyond the passenger transport executive area.

Rewards for the few The chief executive of Arriva is now paid £917,000 a year, a 35% increase on last year. Arriva increased unregulated fares on CrossCountry Trains by 11%. The retail price index increased by only 0.9% in 2008. The pay level was revealed shortly after British rail fares went up by an average of 7% and before a Passenger Focus report revealed that British rail passengers are paying much higher fares than people in other European countries.

Rail force Former Gurkha combat engineers are being recruited to work for British rail contractors after leaving the British Army.

A Varsity dream

I received with particular pleasure today an insert with *Railwatch* 118 outlining Railfuture's campaign for the reinstatement of the Oxford to Cambridge route.

The accompanying postcard is already completed and on its way to my MP. Having watched the East-West consortium site periodically this was a real encouragement and I began to dream.

I dreamt of a name, the Varsity Line, since it will link ultimately at least three premier academic cities – Oxford, Cambridge and Norwich.

I dreamt of a livery for the train operator's service – horizontal Oxford and Cambridge blues separated by a white band.

With Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge as my alma mater (coat of arms left), it would have to be Cambridge blue on top, for purely aesthetic reasons alone, you understand! Then how about the respective business schools in Oxford and Cambridge putting theory into practice by forging a partnership to create a train operator or open access operator (whichever is appropriate) to run the service as a commercial endeavour capable of funding their core educational activities?

If there is a serious intent to include Norwich then the University of East Anglia has a business school too, so even more possibilities exist! Anyhow enough of my dreams and thanks for a very informative journal!

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East-West backing

Please may I have a few more of your East-West rail postcards to send to MPs?

Our local MP Bernard Jenkin (Conservative MP for North Essex) has replied sympathetically, but said that "in their first term" they would merely examine possibilities.

So even if there is a change of government in 2010, nothing would actually happen before 2015. Oh dear!

And as for the present Government, they were going to do something soon after the 1997 election! Ah me. Not in our lifetime?

*Michael Morris, Lawford, Manningtree, Essex CO11 2LP
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Prodding MP

I sent the East-West postcard to my MP Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) as requested in *Railwatch* 118. He



Your letters extra

thanked me for contacting him and said that he had written to the Department for Transport asking for their comments. He added: "When I receive a response, I will contact you again." Let us hope he keeps prodding the DfT.

Janice Uphill, Paines Lane, Pinner, Middlesex HA5 3BX

Shocked by pledge

It was with some incredulity that I read in the press that Theresa Villiers, Shadow Transport Secretary, had not only announced Conservative plans to build a new high-speed line connecting London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds but had also revealed that their 8-point plan included making more use of existing track, longer train company franchises, longer trains, longer platforms, additional lines and a passengers' champion.

When I had recovered from the shock, I decided that this was too good an opportunity to let go. I have cut out the article and, should a Conservative Government be elected, I shall waste no time in bringing these commitments to the attention of the Transport Secretary and David Cameron. If nothing else, it might get rail issues pushed up the agenda a bit. I urge others to do the same.

*Janet Cuff, Tatton Road North, Stockport SK4 4QX
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Can we count on you?

Railwatch 118 mentioned Chiltern Railways' two Sudbury stations which are in London's zone four.

Sudbury & Harrow Road is our capital city's last remaining "limited service" station, with just four trains in one direction only in each weekday peak period. Sudbury Hill Harrow has no more than an hourly service and that confined to weekdays only.

On the other side of north London, in zone two, two other stations have shed that belittling "limited service" description.

Twelve years ago Cambridge

Railfuture annual general meeting
Saturday 9 May 2009 Leeds Methodist Mission LS1 3AX

Heath and London Fields in East London had trains only during peak periods on weekdays.

Since then, the level of weekday passenger train service has increased four-fold.

That has been more than matched by an eight-fold increase in the number of passengers during the peak at London Fields, and a six-fold increase at Cambridge Heath where there is competition from seven bus routes passing the front door and the Central line's Bethnal Green station only a five-minute walk away.

These figures were recorded, not estimated, by two people standing in the cold in December 2008 and counting the number of passengers going in and out of the stations.

Far from being peak-hours only, the trains now run throughout the whole operating day, seven days a week, with a turn-up-and-go four trains per hour each way being the norm, except on Sundays when there is a half-hourly service.

How come? Persistence – of course. Promotion – certainly. Persuasion – fundamental. Patience – rewarded.

Underpinning all has been a solid base of evidence of actual passenger use, gathered the hard way by direct observation, manual recording and collation on a consistent and comparable basis.

That data-set has then been deployed in a conversation, not confrontation, with the operator which has enhanced the train service, and station facilities, in increments.

Can the lessons be transferred? As co-founder of the Cambridge Heath & London Fields Rail Users' Group, and as vice-chairman of Railfuture's London & South-East branch, may I invite interested Railfuture members, from any branch, to make contact with a view to organising some passenger counts at Sudbury Hill Harrow and Sudbury & Harrow Road stations later this summer?

Whatever the previous efforts to improve the service at those two stations, and whatever the views

about exactly what those improvements might be, an up-to-date understanding of the volumes and flows of existing use probably has to be a springboard for future lobbying.

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Suburban speed-up

With passenger numbers lower than forecast when franchises were negotiated, perhaps train operators could vary their timetables to serve their existing customers better and attract some new ones.

The 17.45 and 18.15 Waterloo to Portsmouth line trains, non-stop to Guildford via Cobham, overtake the 17.32 and 18.02 stopping trains to Guildford via Cobham at Hampton Court Junction between Surbiton and Hinchley Wood stations.

By overtaking at Surbiton station where the 17.45 and 18.15 could stop for cross-platform interchange with the 17.32 and 18.02, passengers for Cobham line stations arriving at Waterloo between 17.32 and 17.45 and 18.02 and 18.15 could arrive home about half an hour earlier.

Similarly, passengers on the stopping trains bound for Guildford and beyond could, by changing at Surbiton, get to Guildford very much quicker. On the downside, some journeys would be a couple of minutes slower.

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Please use email if possible

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Yorkshire

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Direct trains to Yorkshire cities

Three Yorkshire cities are to get their first direct rail services to London for decades.

Bradford, Halifax and Wakefield – along with the towns of Brighouse and Pontefract – will benefit from a decision to allow Grand Northern to run on the East Coast main line. A one-way turn-up-and-go ticket will cost about £34.

Plans by National Express East Coast to extend its current main line services to Harrogate, Lincoln and Bradford Foster Square were also backed by the Office for Rail Regulation.

Proposals from Hull Trains, which wanted to run services from Harrogate to London, and Platinum Trains, which wanted to operate from Aberdeen, were rejected.

Managing director of York-based Grand Northern Ian Yeowart – whose sister company Grand Central runs services from Sunderland to London – said the decision would provide a big boost for the region's economy.

"The half-hourly service from London to Leeds has been massively important for that area's economy," he said. "We're looking to do this for all the other towns in the Leeds city region."

"It will hopefully be a very important link for Halifax with the fight to keep HBOS jobs there. Having a direct link to the new Lloyds HQ in London will make it far more attractive to keep staff in that city."

Grand Northern has been given permission to run three trains a day each way but is hoping to negotiate that up to four.

Class 180 diesel trains built by Alstom at Washwood Heath, Birmingham and which were previously used by First Great Western (and had space for six bicycles) are likely to be used on the services which start in December.

Tory party gets on track to the North

The Conservative Party launched a new commission in February to look into improving transport in the North. Shadow foreign secretary William Hague, and shadow transport secretary Theresa Villiers took a train trip from Leeds to Bradford.

Nick's green initiative pays off

A massive 42% rise in 12 months in the number of passengers using a small station has been achieved by Railfuture member Nick Harvey who also runs Green Express Railtours, writes *Graham Collett*.

With help from 100 villagers at Hunmanby he has promoted the existing rail services and helped to make the station – on the Hull-Scarborough line – more welcoming and comfortable.

He produced and printed at his own expense a newsletter giving details of local bus and rail services, including tips on how to get cheaper tickets.

He and a team of volunteers distributed this to 1,600 homes in the area. He also managed to achieve coverage on local TV, five radio stations and in the press.

"The helpful information about booking on line went down really well," said Nick, "and it will also boost our numbers as by getting tickets in advance, it means the guards have fewer on-train fares to collect and fares are not missed."

Nick is now keen to take his ideas further and is trying to persuade the county council to be more pro-active in promoting public transport. He said: "Having worked on these ideas for a couple of years, it's working and needs to step up a gear."

"I'd consider offering my services in a voluntary capacity to try these ideas in an area where rural public transport is underperforming, or going in when a service cut is threatened to see if development work could turn the service around. Once a service is cut it is very hard to get it back, and then restore confidence to use it again."

Sample copies of Nick's newsletter and leaflets are available from Nick Harvey, 66 Stonegate, Hunmanby, Filey YO14 0PP. More info: www.greenscarborough.org.uk. Email: info@greenexpressrailtours.co.uk