
BEXHILL RAIL ACTION GROUP (BRAG)

NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2014

A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

In our last BRAG Newsletter I described the range of issues on which we were then negotiating with the rail authorities, and I said the outlook for 2014 would be exciting: Little did I know how exciting! I shall give an overview of the major recent developments here - elsewhere in this Newsletter we give details of what is happening and how BRAG is involved.

The unprecedented winter rain storms led to prolonged closure of the Hastings-Tunbridge Wells- Charing Cross line - and a very real possibility that high waves would also sever the line between Bexhill and Hastings. Services on all lines in our area were regularly disrupted by falling trees and other damage.

And then at the end of March the whole mood changed. The Secretary of State for Transport came to Hastings and announced not only the immediate re-opening of the line to Charing Cross but also his personal commitment to a new project to bring high speed Javelin trains to Rye, Hastings and Bexhill. Could this really be true? Yes, said a senior representative from Network Rail, there is indeed a strong business case for upgrading the line to Ashford to take Javelins and so provide an entirely new, and quicker, route to London from Bexhill.

The prospect of much faster journeys to London via Ashford is now competing for BRAG's attention with a major change to the way our services to London Victoria and Brighton are managed. A new and much expanded Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern Franchise has just been awarded - which means that the agenda of important but local issues we have been carefully negotiating with Southern Rail will now need to be fed into a much larger rail organisation with a lot of big challenges on its own "to do list".

One of the key issues we have been constantly pursuing with Southern Rail concerns the management of Bexhill Station. After the major investment to restore this beautiful historic station BRAG has become increasingly concerned about reduced staffing levels, people travelling without tickets, and uncertainty around the retail outlets on the station.

And finally - to show the very wide range of matters which get discussed at BRAG meetings - we have become closely involved with the development of Gatwick Airport's expansion plans. This is because Gatwick aspires to improve surface access routes for both air travellers and airport staff - which puts a spotlight on how the current relatively slow rail services from our area to Gatwick could be enhanced.

All of these developments have strengthened BRAG's working links with the other rail user groups in our area - notably from Eastbourne, Hastings and Rye - with whom we collaborate under the umbrella of the East Sussex Rail Alliance.

Hugh Sharp
Chairman

HIGH SPEED TO HASTINGS.... AND BEXHILL!

At a Rail Summit hosted by Amber Rudd MP on 31st March, and attended by the Secretary of State for Transport Patrick McLoughlin, senior figures from the rail industry, local government and business, Network Rail unveiled proposals to extend high-speed 'Javelin' services via an upgraded Marshlink to Hastings and Bexhill. All of those attending were supportive of the plan, which would see the journey time from Bexhill to London reduced from the current two hours to around 78 minutes (68 minutes from Hastings to London).

Network Rail will continue working to develop the business case, which if successful will be delivered in Control Period 6 between 2019 and 2022.

This is a fantastic project, which the rail user groups have pressed hard for, but there remains a lot of work to be done - and at least one General Election between now and then.... Amber will lead a liaison group which will report back on a regular basis. Further updates will be included in this newsletter, as and when.

Richard Madge

THAMESLINK SOUTHERN GREAT NORTHERN (TSGN) FRANCHISE ANNOUNCEMENT

The combined Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern (TSGN) franchise was awarded to Govia (Go-Ahead 65% /Keolis 35% joint venture) on May 23rd. They currently run the Southern franchise, which will pass to the TSGN franchise in July 2015 anyway. Locally we will have continuity rather than the upheaval of a change of franchisee, with the Southern and Gatwick Express brands retained.

However this does not preclude improvements. The new franchise is actually a management contract, (similar to London Overground), so that the DfT takes the financial risk but Govia will be fined for not meeting franchise commitments to deliver the promised improvements.

Govia have promised:-

1. New trains – introducing three new train fleets
2. More services – 10,000 additional morning peak seats into London
3. Increasing capacity – 50% more passenger capacity created
4. Better connections – up to 24 trains per hour through the Thameslink core in peak periods
5. Station enhancement – £50m investment in improving facilities at all 239 stations (including all day staffing – first to last train – at the 100 busiest stations).

However, it is unclear how much of this will benefit us directly. There is no commitment for new Thameslink routes to serve East Coastway destinations, and items 1 to 4 above refer mainly to improvements to Moorgate, Thameslink and Gatwick Express services. Additional coaches to Metro services are being introduced in the London area. Carriages are now in the process of being built for Thameslink to augment existing coaching stock, but the full fleet will not be in operation until 2018.

Station and staffing improvements have been promised, but not yet specified in detail. Despite a commitment to run yet another service each hour between London and Brighton, no word has yet been received on lengthening the 2 car Ashford trains; and we appear stuck with splitting and joining at Haywards Heath, which adds time and causes overcrowding.

Be assured that BRAG will continue to press Govia for further improvements.

Richard Tyler

BEXHILL STATION

“You win some, you lose some” is perhaps the best way to describe the current situation at Bexhill Station.

BRAG’s determination to see the station’s staffing levels restored to an adequate level finally bore fruit. Thanks to our involvement of Passenger Focus, together with the irrefutable evidence of all the booking-office closures, an additional member of staff (a “floor-walker”) was finally recruited by Southern in March of this year – and she is proving to be a very welcome addition.

During this time, we have not lost sight of the situation with the Café, which is still closed. However, Southern have advised that a lease has been signed with a new operator, and there are certainly encouraging signs with

“men at work” behind the shutters. At the same time, many will have noticed that the Trackside pharmacy is moving into larger premises on Sea Road next to the station, which begs the question whether a new, unwelcome, empty space will be created within the station. BRAG has recently agreed that a sub-group can pursue an “Adopt-a-Station” project with Southern, but only once it is satisfied that the Café and Trackside premises are both operational. This project would bring additional enhancements to the station.

“Operation Papio” was instigated at the station by Chief Inspector Warren Franklin in April. This high-profile police operation was implemented to put a stop to “undesirables” boarding the train at St. Leonards Warrior Square, and travelling to Bexhill to do a few hours’ work of begging and shoplifting in the town-centre before once again dodging the fare back. One enabling factor, of course, for this unsavoury activity is the lack of automatic gatelines at both stations – which will hopefully be addressed as a priority once the new franchise comes into operation in 2015. In the meantime, Warren Franklin’s officers will continue to be closely involved, and he would also like to base some of them intermittently at one of the platform offices.

Yolanda Laybourne

HASTINGS LINE UPDATE

Network Rail are continuing their multi-million pound investment programme to strengthen resilience at numerous potential trouble-spots that were identified in the winter 2013 disruptions reviews.

Southeastern have just recently published their (draft) January 2015 timetable, which is necessitated by an 18 month closure of part of London Bridge station for re-building work. It also puts detail onto the promised ‘Hastings Express’. This will call at St Leonards Warrior Square, Battle, Tunbridge Wells, High Brooms, Waterloo East and Charing Cross only, with a target journey time of 90mins. The service will serve Battle because a lot of travellers from the northern fringes of Hastings, and also the Bexhill area, use this station.

The morning train departs Hastings at 08.04, returning from Charing Cross at 16.20. An ‘all stations’ stopping service continues to run from Charing Cross at 16.15 and is overtaken by the new service at Tonbridge. All stakeholders will be studying patronage of this new train, as it occupies a path in between peak-hours demand and off-peak-fare validity. Maybe there is an eye on the government drive towards flexible working hours here?

There will be an extra morning service to Cannon St. Moreover, the 23.45 service from Charing Cross will run via Cannon St, offering a late service from the City, and enabling it to call at London Bridge at 00.05. This is good news for those attending evening events in London.

Passenger Focus has released its Passenger Satisfaction results for the ‘over-winter’ period, which saw a lowering of satisfaction across a number of indicators. Although Southeastern have attributed the blame to Network Rail for many of these, other things such as passenger information are wholly within their remit.

The extension of the Southeastern franchise through a Direct Award is an ongoing process within the DfT, but with its commencement due this September the final announcement must be imminent.

Martin Woodfine

GATWICK AIRPORT AND THE SOUTH COAST

After considerable investigation and discussion, ESRA is submitting the case for substantial upgrades of the South Coast rail lines – in line with the South Coast Main Line concept – in support of the Gatwick Airport

expansion plans. This is being presented to the Davies Commission's investigation into options for major airport development – Heathrow, Gatwick and Thames Estuary. The Commission will present its findings after the 2015 General Election.

Gatwick Airport intends to grow its business whether or not it gets the green light for a second runway. The Brighton Main Line is already under pressure and that can only increase – with both airport and Coastal commuter traffic adding major new volume. While Network Rail is progressing rail infrastructure developments in the capital – London Bridge and Victoria, and with East Croydon/Clapham Junction in the pipeline - rail facilities at Gatwick southwards to Brighton and the coast are a lesser priority.

The ESRA submission, spearheaded by Ray Chapman, supports Gatwick's aspiration to tap the employment pools of the South Coast – Eastbourne, Bexhill, and especially Hastings – where deprivation and unemployment of school leavers is significant. This will also add impetus for educational establishments to train for suitable employment opportunities.

ESRA contends that the coastal route from Hastings to London via the Brighton Main Line requires a concerted infrastructure development plan – installing improved rail junctions for faster through interchange, re-laid track to increase line speeds, and better station facilities to match the newly installed (but as yet un-commissioned) signalling capability.

Specifically to assist Hastings-Gatwick flow, ESRA will press for the redesign of the BML Keymer Junction, and re-installing of the Willingdon Chord. Despite local fears to the contrary, this would provide the operator with an opportunity to enhance services to Eastbourne, Bexhill and Hastings through a thorough review of passenger needs and services.

Bexhill is already the future destination of extended Javelin services from St Pancras via Ashford. It can also be at the heart of new initiatives to transform services via Gatwick to the capital.

Richard Tilden-Smith
East Sussex Rail Alliance

NEWS IN BRIEF

East Coastway Re-signalling postponed again. Originally due to go live last August, and postponed until April 2014, Network Rail have informed us that they are unable to confirm when the new system will be commissioned. BRAG understands that subcontractors have yet to satisfy Network Rail that the new level crossing operating systems will be effective, and the company is reluctant to name a further date until remedial work has been completed.

Half-barriers have been installed at Winchelsea level crossing following an enforcement notice from the Office of Rail Regulation. However, this development has not led to an increase in linespeed.

A new SUPER OFF-PEAK fare from Bexhill stations and Normans Bay to London has been introduced in the May fares round, and costs £22.80 (Railcard holders £15.05). This can be used to London Charing Cross via Tonbridge. It is valid on departures from local stations after 9am, and unlike the Southern Super-Off Peak fare via Haywards Heath (£17.40/Railcard holders £11.50), is also valid homebound in the evening peak. Beware however, that the last connecting service to Bexhill stations is at 20.45 from Charing Cross/20.53 from London Bridge. Nonetheless, if you are planning a night out in the West End, you are permitted to use it on the 21.47 and 22.47 home from Victoria via Eastbourne.

The new 'TWO TOGETHER' railcard offers 34% off most journeys when the two named holders travel together. By way of an example this potentially equates to over £100 saving for a couple or two friends travelling from Bexhill to Edinburgh on an off-peak return ticket. It costs £30 and is available from ticket offices; or online at www.twotogether-railcard.co.uk where you can save £3 by entering the code 'ONLINE'.

Collect NECTAR POINTS on ticket purchases by registering and purchasing tickets with train operators managed by the First Group. This includes www.firstcapitalconnect.co.uk. 2 points are awarded per £1 spent. There are no booking fees, and tickets may be collected on departure from vending machines at our local stations in the usual way.

MEMBERSHIP QUERIES: New members are always welcome. Membership costs £5 per year. For further details please email Yolanda Laybourne, BRAG Treasurer, at bexrag@yahoo.co.uk.

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS: We meet on the second Monday of each month, 7pm at the offices of *Hastings Direct*, Conquest House, Collington Avenue, Bexhill. Meetings for the rest of the year are therefore as follows:

11th August, 8th September, 13th October and 10th November.

The December meeting is traditionally a Christmas meal at a local hostelry: Venue and time to be confirmed at the November meeting.
