
BEXHILL RAIL ACTION GROUP (BRAG)

NEWSLETTER WINTER 2010

TRAIN SERVICES

December 2010 Timetable. Readers may have heard in the local media that plans by Southern to run 4 fast trains an hour between London and Brighton from 12th December were vetoed at the last minute by the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR). This followed a formal objection by rival operator First Capital Connect, which itself already runs 4 trains an hour between London and Brighton, in addition to Southern's existing three trains an hour.

Representations were also made by the East Sussex Rail Alliance (ESRA), of which BRAG is a member, to the Department for Transport and local MPs. ESRA's complaints were reported on BBC *Southeast Today* and in the industry journal *Modern Railways*, as well as the local press.

BRAG's long-held view is that insufficient capacity or demand exists for both operators to run 4 trains an hour each between London and Brighton, and that this competition for revenue on the mainline has a detrimental effect on other services. We are pleased that this issue is gaining wider recognition. Other towns on the Sussex coast, both east and west of Brighton, have very a poor service to and from London, which is less frequent, slower and more overcrowded. Southern's plans would have meant our services waiting even longer at Haywards Heath for the new fast services to overtake, with an adverse impact on timekeeping.

Along with ESRA we have made clear our view to Southern and the ORR that there needs to be a wholesale re-evaluation of how paths are apportioned on the Brighton Mainline, so that the East and West Coastway lines get a better deal.

ENGINEERING WORKS

BRAG was concerned that on Sunday 3rd October, simultaneous engineering blockades took place on all three routes out of East Sussex, namely the Brighton Mainline south of Three Bridges, the Tonbridge Mainline, and the Marshlink between Hastings and Ashford. Additionally, the Uckfield line was also closed for engineering work that day. Passengers travelling to/from London were forced to use a replacement bus service in every case.

Following representations through consumer body Passenger Focus, Network Rail, the infrastructure operator, has subsequently apologised. Their policy is always to keep at least one of the three routes from Hastings to London open. However, this involves liaison between two different area divisions, Kent and Sussex, and on this occasion engineering schedules had not been cross-checked. Network Rail has now promised that there will be no similar clash in 2011.

STATIONS

Congratulations to Southern for its ongoing work maintaining local stations. Painters have recently been hard at work at Bexhill station. Just five years ago Bexhill station was in a disgraceful state, following years of neglect by its previous proprietors. It is now something which we as a community can be proud of.

WINTER WEATHER

Winter well and truly gate-crashed autumn this year, with heavy snow starting at the end of November. It remains to be seen how we fare the rest of the winter. The rail network in the south east of England rarely performs well in such conditions, because the electric 'third rail' used to power the trains freezes over. Services on many lines were suspended for several days, with horror stories of some trains being stranded for several hours overnight.

Southern has a small fleet of diesel trains which are more resilient, and this year prioritised running an emergency service between Hastings – Eastbourne – Brighton. Last year during similar conditions, a diesel service ran to/from Ashford where reliable onward connections were available via High Speed 1, which uses overhead electric power. This year the Marshlink service remained suspended, though arguably this route via Ashford is the more robust in bad weather.

While it is right there should be scrutiny of the railways' emergency plans during inclement weather, BRAG wishes to thank railway staff for their efforts to keep a service going.

INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

Eurostar fares disparity. Multiple test bookings on the Eurostar website have revealed that passengers travelling from Ashford to Brussels are often charged up to £60 more per return journey than passengers with reservations on the same services to/from St Pancras.

Eurostar's response has been disorganised. It initially denied the problem; and then said it had been fixed when it hadn't. In response to one enquiry, Eurostar staff suggested that Ashford passengers should travel from Ebbsfleet or St Pancras instead! This is

unsatisfactory: a direct service from Ashford to Brussels has only recently been restored: It is important for it to be shown to be a success, that local people use it, and that there are accurate figures for its usage. After some goading from a number of different quarters including MPs and the local Kentish media, Eurostar has now admitted to a 'technical glitch' on its booking system and has put a note on the website advising Ashford passengers to phone for 'best fares'. We hope the issue will be resolved fully as soon as possible.

On a more positive note, from December Eurostar has introduced an inbound service from Brussels to Ashford on Saturday evenings. This was a gap in the timetable, and now makes a day trip possible. There are other minor timetable adjustments, giving extra time in Paris and Brussels for those travelling out and back the same day.

Hugh Sharp, BRAG Chairman has written to Eurostar suggesting it trials an afternoon outbound service from Ashford to Lille and Brussels, which currently remains a significant timetable gap. We await a response.

German Railways. In October German Railways (Deutsche Bahn) brought one of its InterCity Express (ICE) trains to London to publicise its plans to run direct services between London, Germany and the Netherlands from 2013. BRAG, along with other local stakeholders, is lobbying DB for the new services to call at Ashford International, which is conveniently served by an hourly direct train from this area. We have received a polite response to the effect that DB is concentrating on the technical aspects in order to get approval for the service, and will consider stopping patterns later. Nonetheless BRAG is pleased that the issue received intense publicity, and is clearly now on the agenda, with DB aware of the strength of local goodwill.

Interestingly, Eurostar has also recently unveiled plans for new services to run beyond Paris and Brussels from 2014, with Amsterdam, Lyon and Geneva considered likely destinations. It is hoped that some or all of these services will call at Ashford too.

BARGAIN CORNER

Kids travel for £1 on Southern services when accompanied by an adult. Southeastern also periodically runs the scheme as a promotion, including on its High Speed services.

Oyster cards can be bought over the counter from the **Information Centre at Hastings Town Hall**. Oyster is a 'pay as you go' smartcard scheme which gives discounts of up to 50% on the usual cash fares for bus and underground travel in the Greater London area. The amount you pay is capped so that you will pay no more than the cost of a Travelcard over a 24 hour period. Once you have the card you can 'top-up' online.

DID YOU KNOW?

That you can travel from Bexhill to Paris in under 3 ½ hours? The 08.25 from Bexhill connects into a Eurostar service from Ashford International at 09.55, which arrives into the French capital at 12.47 (local time is 1 hour ahead of the UK), making breakfast in Bexhill followed by lunch in Paris, a real possibility.

In the morning peak, some of the fastest connections to London from Bexhill are via Ashford International? The 06.07 from Bexhill will get you to St Pancras at 07.48; and the 07.09 arrives at 08.48, changing at Ashford onto a High-Speed 'Javelin' service. St Pancras and neighbouring Kings Cross are also the departure point for onward connections to the East Midlands, north of England and Scotland. Supplements may be payable for travel on the High Speed services.

For times and fares see www.southernrailway.com and www.eurostar.co.uk

SUPPORT BRAG

Website – would you or your organisation like to sponsor the BRAG website? We have an increasing number of 'hits', and the media and other stakeholders regularly contact us via this route. For under £40 per year, your logo and a link to your own website could be displayed on our homepage. Please email our webmaster Gareth Smith on bexrag@yahoo.co.uk

Join BRAG – The more members and supporters we have the more effective we can be in lobbying for improvements to local rail services. Be the first to know what is going on. Membership is only £5 per year and you can be as active as you wish! For further details, please email our Treasurer, Martin Woodfine on bexrag@yahoo.co.uk

BRAG MEETINGS – We meet at 7pm, the second Monday of every month at the offices of Hastings Direct, Conquest House, Collington Avenue, Bexhill. We are grateful to Hastings Direct for the use of their facilities. The next three meetings will be

Mon 10th January 2011

Mon 14th February 2011

Mon 14th March 2011

AND FINALLY: A very Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all our friends and supporters!
