
BEXHILL RAIL ACTION GROUP (BRAG)

NEWSLETTER WINTER 2011

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

BRAG's convivial Christmas dinner - held this year as huge winds and waves built up outside our seafront venue - brings to an end another year of ceaselessly monitoring the factors which could enhance or threaten East Sussex rail services. As usual we picked up early signals of potential changes - and went swiftly to the rail authorities to discover how Bexhill rail users might be affected.

So, for example, we have been assured that there are no current plans to de-staff our local stations, or to resurrect the aborted 2010 plan to truncate the Ashford-Brighton service at Eastbourne. We pressed for early details of plans to close the line between Hastings and Ashford for about nine weeks to permit renovation of the Ore Tunnel. We remain unconvinced that use of bus replacements for the whole of this journey is the best solution for customers - and we will watch carefully how events develop when the closure begins in early 2012.

Nick Munro's arrival on our Committee has led to a much stronger focus on the interests of Normans Bay residents - and in particular how plans to replace the existing manned level crossing with an automated system would affect both train users and motorists.

BRAG Committee has always paid close attention to the daily texts we receive from rail commuters from Bexhill to London. This year we were pleased to hear that rush-hour West Coastway services, the habitual lateness of which held up many other services - including Bexhill services - in the East Croydon area are being monitored. Action by Southern has since improved punctuality, but the network is intensely crowded in peak hours and any small delay can quickly mushroom. We are continuing to watch this situation carefully as the ability to reach London and return during peak hours affects many people's views about Bexhill as a place to live.

BRAG has regularly highlighted the need to improve other routes between East Sussex and London in order to take some pressure off the Brighton Main Line. We have therefore strongly supported efforts to shorten journey times on Hastings-Charing Cross services. We have also much welcomed the opportunity of accessing through Ashford the new high speed Javelin services to St Pancras - and we continually press the rail authorities to give more publicity to this route.

And so to another action-packed year in 2012: Our monthly meetings are fixed - but what we will end up discussing is anybody's guess at this stage!"

Hugh Sharp, Chairman.

TRAIN SERVICES

December 2011 Timetable. The winter timetable commenced on 11th December and runs until 18th May 2012. There are no significant alterations to services. We understand that there will be no major changes next summer in London and the south east due to the London Olympics, but clearly this may be a matter of definition. During the Olympics themselves there will be special timetables on a number of routes in the London area and changes to connecting High Speed services from Ashford. These arrangements have not yet been published.

Timetable Tracker. Regular travellers have noticed a slippage in performance of a number of East Coastway services to and from London in the morning and evening peaks, including late-running and short formation. This follows a concerted effort earlier in the year by Southern to identify “killer” trains that were running late and having a knock on effect across the network. We understand most of these originate at Littlehampton or Bognor Regis. BRAG Committee member Mark Chawner is compiling a spreadsheet and would like to hear of any difficulties. Please email Mark via the BRAG email bextrag@yahoo.co.uk.

MARSHLINK ENGINEERING WORKS

Readers of previous newsletters will be aware of a 9 week engineering blockade of the line between Hastings and Ashford, starting 9th January 2012. This is to enable urgent repairs to Ore Tunnel.

We have had confirmation from Network Rail that it will be using the opportunity to repair and upgrade track elsewhere on the line, which in the future will lead to higher line speeds and faster and more reliable journey times.

However, long term gain means short term pain, with bus replacement services running the entire route between Hastings and Ashford, doubling the journey time. To make matters worse, there will also be simultaneous road works along various sections of the parallel A259. In concert with our fellow rail action groups in Hastings and Rye, BRAG had pressed for a shuttle rail service to run between Rye and Ashford, but the rail authorities have stated that this is operationally difficult.

For Bexhill rail travellers, connections to London via High Speed 1 via Ashford are likely to be impractical during the blockade, and travellers are advised to use the Eastbourne or Tunbridge Wells routes. Equally, passengers to and from east Kent may find it easier to travel by rail changing at Tonbridge.

We have suggested to Southern that they offer free weekend travel on the Marshlink in March when the service is re-launched. We await a response.

EAST COASTWAY RE-SIGNALING AND ASSOCIATED WORK

Our sources at Network Rail have confirmed that this is scheduled to be undertaken and completed in 2013. This will involve the installation of a completely new signalling system, bringing shorter headways between trains and better operational flexibility.

Our Normans Bay representative Nick Munro has also been informed by Network Rail that the current manually-operated crossing will be replaced by automatic barriers. This will mean that the crossing will be closed for less time, and pedestrians will be able to access the opposite platform. However, local residents are concerned that this will leave the road open 24/7 and bring an overall increase in traffic using their private road. Lack of visibility and clearances on the crossing have also been highlighted.

HASTINGS MAINLINE

Our colleagues in SHRIMP (St Leonards and Hastings Rail Improvement Project) advise that with the support of Hastings and Rye MP Amber Rudd, they are continuing to press for a faster off-peak service between Hastings and London via Tunbridge Wells. This outcome requires a comprehensive timetable re-write and is in large-part dependent upon government plans for re-franchising.

A further campaign is to maintain through peak-hour services on the Hastings line to and from the City of London – either via Cannon St or on the Thameslink route – when the Thameslink project is completed later this decade.

BARGAIN CORNER

Southern have informed us of their New Year promotion: 10% off all Southern Off Peak and Southern Advance tickets bought online at southernrailway.com between the 2nd and 31st January 2012. Please see www.southernrailway.com for more information and terms.

Southern have also frozen Advance Purchase fares (for specific booked trains) again for January 2012.

BEXHILL – HASTINGS LINK ROAD (BHLR)

On 14th December the Department for Transport announced that it would make a final decision on this project in March 2012. In the meantime, it will be evaluating what other measures - including possible improvements to rail services - could assist re-generation in Hastings and Bexhill.

We smell a rat.

BRAG does not feel qualified to comment on the overall cost/benefits of the Bexhill - Hastings Link Road (BHLR). We welcome the DfT's invitation to consider the contribution of local rail services to this area's transport problems, while noting that, previously, it has repeatedly commissioned various multi-modal studies: Each of these has been extremely protracted - but nonetheless resulted in very little concrete action. Conversely, one of the reasons BRAG itself was formed, was to respond to the threats that have been made to remove or reduce existing train services, despite periodic pro-rail rhetoric from the authorities.

For our part, we shall continue to advocate strongly for the maintenance and improvement of local and regional rail services, irrespective of the DfT's ultimate decision whether or not to build the BHLR.

SUPPORT BRAG

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

FORTHCOMING BRAG MEETINGS

Due to renovation work, we are unable to meet at our usual venue (Hastings Direct) until March. Our next 2 meetings on Mondays 9th January and 13th February will take place at the **Sackville Hotel** on Bexhill seafront. All being well, we will return to our regular venue, Hastings Direct, Conquest House, Collington Avenue, Bexhill on Monday 12th March.

All meetings begin at 7pm and finish by 9pm.

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