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# BEXHILL RAIL ACTION GROUP (BRAG)

## NEWSLETTER WINTER 2013

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### A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

2013 has been without a doubt the most successful period I have seen in my five years as a BRAG member. Before highlighting some of our activities I must pay tribute to the contribution all our members make. BRAG is a strong team. Everyone who attends our meetings on the second Monday of each month brings a unique knowledge of and perspective on the economic and transport challenges faced by towns along this part of the Sussex coast.

Everyone is entitled to share in our achievements. So it may be invidious to pick out individuals but, as BRAG Chairman, I know I could not do my job without the hard work done by Richard Madge (our Publicity Officer and who leads on Brighton Mainline issues), Yolanda Laybourne (our Treasurer and who leads on Bexhill Station issues), Martin Woodfine (our link with the Hastings rail user group and who leads on South Eastern Rail issues and Hastings to Ashford issues); and Ray Chapman (who leads on our input to the overarching East Sussex Rail Alliance group and who takes a high profile in debates about economic strategy for our area). I would also like to thank Andy Black, who is standing down as Secretary after four years in the role.

BRAG attaches high importance to our ongoing relationship with Southern Rail. We have always been keen to highlight improvements they make to services and stations - but in turn we always act swiftly to draw their attention to developments which in our view will work to the detriment our train services. Two examples of these interventions occurred in 2013.

First: We questioned the realism of the December 2012 timetable – pointing out that in the evening peak three trains starting from London Bridge, Victoria and Brighton were all scheduled to converge on the Lewes-Eastbourne corridor too closely for the antique signalling to handle. As we predicted regular delays ensued. However Southern immediately responded positively and met with BRAG to consider solutions. Unfortunately the complexity of modern timetables ruled out early changes. Southern have monitored performance closely and are working hard to minimise delays until the new modern signalling is introduced, which unfortunately Network Rail have now put back until April 2014.

Second: BRAG became increasingly aware of periods when the Bexhill Station Ticket Office was closed when officially advertised as open. A log of closures was built up with which we approached Southern midway through the year. We were much indebted to support from the rail user group Passenger Focus. Southern have now told us of their plans to deploy more staff resources here.

A key feature of 2013 has been the attendance at BRAG meetings of representatives from organisations bidding to win the new Southern/Thameslink Franchise from mid-2014. We have used these occasions to press strongly for key improvements to services through Bexhill – in particular reducing journey times to London Victoria by ending attachment/division of trains at Haywards Heath, electrification of the Hastings-Ashford line, and improved connectivity at key stations on the network.

Our heavy emphasis on the advantages of electrification to Ashford has now been taken up by local MPs Greg Barker and Amber Rudd who have called on the Government to see this project as an opportunity to extend the high speed “Javelin” services to Hastings and Bexhill – thereby providing an alternative and faster route to London.

These are just high points in BRAG’s busy 2013 agenda. I could go on to report our interest in the Norman’s Bay level crossing project and our recent meeting with Rother District Council to see how their economic strategy and our rail priorities can best combine.

BRAG always welcomes new members. So if all this is of interest to you do get in touch with Yolanda Laybourne at [bextrag@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bextrag@yahoo.co.uk) and we look forward to meeting you in 2014.

**Hugh Sharp**  
**BRAG Chairman**

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### **BEXHILL TICKET OFFICE**

The ticket office is the nerve-centre and hub of any railway station, and a place where the general public should be able to buy tickets and obtain advice and information during its advertised opening-hours in order to plan their rail journeys. With 3 routes to London (Victoria, Charing Cross and St. Pancras) Bexhill Ticket Office is kept very busy with enquiries as to the best way to travel to London and beyond. Add to this, enquiries for Gatwick Airport and Eurostar from Ashford International, and Bexhill station can (and should) be a hive of activity.

However, over the past year or so, the Bexhill Ticket Office has earned itself a reputation for being worryingly unreliable, with far too many random closures. Its posted opening hours are 06:10 - 19:35 Monday to Saturday, and 08:45 - 15:45 on Sundays, but just over a year ago BRAG members started to notice that the ticket office was closed, with the blinds down, far too often during these hours.

BRAG started to monitor these closures in December, 2012. Due to the availability of its members, this monitoring could only be done intermittently, and on an "ad hoc" basis. Nevertheless, over the course of one year, over 120 closures have been recorded, with Southern taking little, if any notice of BRAG's continually advising the company of the closures and of its concerns. In fact, in May this year, while advising that its staff "review" would ensure a quality service for its customers using the East Coastway, Southern actually imposed swingeing staff reductions which, effectively, made it impossible for the Bexhill Ticket Office to operate properly and to comply with its agreed opening-hours.

At this point, BRAG contacted Passenger Focus, the national travel watchdog, and their Passenger Manager attended BRAG's October meeting, together with Southern's East Coastway manager. As a result of that meeting, and Passenger Focus' subsequent meetings with Southern's senior management, we are advised that Southern now intends to provide Bexhill station with an additional "roving" member of staff - hopefully from January, 2014 - and that Southern has now advertised the position. On the face of it, this could be good news. However, Southern remains convinced that ticket vending machines are the only way forward, and it is still an uphill battle to try to get the message across to its management that, for some journeys and for some customers, the route-knowledge and expertise of a trained booking-clerk is absolutely essential.

Please keep reports of unscheduled closures coming in.

**Yolanda Laybourne**

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### **FRANCHISING UPDATE**

We reported in our Summer Newsletter on the TSGN franchise. The Invitation to Tender (ITT) was finally issued to shortlisted bidders on 24 September 2013. This prompted contact from all the five bidders, keen to gauge what the customer is looking for from the train service provider. We have met with all five bidders, namely: First Group (current Thameslink operator); Govia (current Southern operator); Stagecoach (current South West Trains operator); Abellio (current Anglia operator); and MTR (current London Overground operator).

The main points we emphasised to each bidder are as follows:-

- 1) Faster service to Victoria chiefly by ending the practice of division of trains at Haywards Heath.

- 2) More attention to the provision of booking office staff in accordance with published opening hours. Not everyone finds the use of Ticket Vending Machines easy, especially irregular customers.
- 3) Increasing the frequency and number of carriages on the Ashford to Brighton service.
- 4) Retention of the good promotional fares currently offered by Southern which encourage greater use of the railway, especially to the irregular customers mentioned above.
- 5) Introduction of a carnet system of ticket, effectively allowing a season ticket to be used irregularly, and the roll out of the Smart card compatible with TfL services.
- 6) Changes to the Gatwick Express service to prevent so many customers deserting it in preference to our Coastway services, so causing overcrowding.

The ITT published by the DfT has made some interesting decisions and points for the bidders to consider, which are a departure from the norm, and could affect our services for the better. For instance:-

- 1) The evaluation of bids to operate the TSGN franchise will place a much stronger emphasis on the quality of bidders' proposals, alongside their cost.
- 2) The TSGN franchise will be a management contract, similar to the current Overground franchise from TfL.
- 3) Bidders are allowed to reduce the current frequency between Brighton and London from 7 trains per hour to 6 and propose other services which might improve services to other destinations (i.e. Coastway).
- 4) Bidders are being given the flexibility to propose changes to current Gatwick Express service patterns and may choose to use different rolling stock that is better suited to the needs of airport passengers.
- 5) Bidders are being given the flexibility to review other service patterns, for instance reducing the number of trains that split & join at Haywards Heath and/or reducing crowding between London & Coastway destinations.

We find it pleasing that the DfT has obviously listened to our and others' comments and included them in the ITT. Bids are due in by 24<sup>th</sup> December 2013, the successful bidder to be announced around May 2014. The new franchise starts September 2014, the Southern franchise merging in July 2015.

**Richard Tyler**

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### **EAST COASTWAY RESIGNALLING: Now you see it – now you don't!**

Those who support the cause of railways in the East Sussex area were pleased when Network Rail (NR) announced this project. The ultimate outcome is that all train movements in this part of the South East (from Keymer Junction to Bexhill) will be controlled from Three Bridges ROC (Regional Operating Centre). This will include the level crossings currently supervised more locally by signallers in their boxes and crossing keepers (at Plumpton and Normans Bay). Along the lineside you would see the replacement of traditional semaphore and colour light signals of various eras with single-lens LED heads capable of displaying red, yellow and green aspects. These would be widely spaced along the line of route. At one go two major benefits are delivered

1. Higher line speeds
2. Higher track capacity (also known as closer headways).

All this was eventually given a commissioning date of the 25th of November 2013 and we all looked on as spaces were cleared for the new signals and their associated equipment boxes. However, problems began to emerge with NR's proposals for some of the many level-crossings and the different processes they wanted to use to detect vehicles and pedestrians leading to removal of barriers and gates. Residents in Plumpton and Normans Bay objected to the removal of the gates currently in use at these locations. We in BRAG have been following this closely with regular updates from Nicholas Munro who lives in Normans Bay. It came as no surprise to be told by NR that commissioning would be delayed until April 2014.

Linesiders and other gricers therefore still have the opportunity to photograph the active use of the signals to be replaced for another few months. Two items of note are the 1930's style colour light distant protecting Normans Bay and the semaphore distant (probably the last wire pulled distant in the South but if you know different please do let us know) protecting Bexhill home signal. This is visible from the platform at Collington and to the west of Cooden Beach you can already see one of the new style signals awaiting the call to duty.

**John Black**

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### **EAST SUSSEX COUNTY RAIL STRATEGY**

Within and forming a key part of ESCC's forward planning is the ESCC Rail Strategy, which follows similar publications by neighbouring Kent and Surrey. In the lead up to this ESCC held a Rail Symposium in Lewes which stakeholders, including all the local rail action groups, were invited to give their thoughts, views, and visions. The resulting document was approved by ESCC in November and can be found by following this link: <http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/87BCB271-0C11-4105-92D1-88BA8EF20E41/35734/item5final.pdf>

All the local rail action groups consider this to be a very positive and forward-thinking document. The highest priority from the appraisal and consultation process is the improvement of the East Coastway route between Hastings and Ashford, with view to delivering improvements to journey times and reliability by enabling an electrified service to be run along the whole of the East Coastway. This line, known as the 'Marshlink' but now the link between the whole of East Sussex and Ashford Int'l / HS1 / European services, is a strategic part of East Sussex transport infrastructure.

Also included, and second priority, is the electrification and then dual tracking of the line between Uckfield - Hurst Green, within the Uckfield – London service.

ESCC considers that improving railway infrastructure in East Sussex will increase capacity, reduce journey times and enable access to jobs, education and training, all of which would contribute to the delivery of the Government, LEPs and County Council objectives of supporting economic growth. These priorities will be used by the County Council to influence the investment decisions of the rail industry, Government and the LEPs.

**Martin Woodfine**

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### **DIARY OF A (LONG-SUFFERING) COMMUTER**

I began commuting from Bexhill in 2003 when the morning journey time was around 2 hours. The equivalent train (06.59) now has a published journey time of 2 hours 10 mins, including a 12 minute stand at Eastbourne, even though no attachment takes place. This service rarely arrives into Victoria right-time, often arriving between 0915 and 0920 thus extending the journey time still further. Delay is mostly down to the fact that the train has to wait for a Gatwick Express – which often runs late - to overtake at East Croydon. We then have a slow approach into London.

More recently, I switched to the 06.25 service, which should arrive into Victoria at around 0830. This service is slightly better, though it gets very busy, with standing passengers after Polegate or Lewes. Again, this train stands at Eastbourne for 10 minutes despite no attachment taking place. And like the 0659, it can be slow on its approach into London: "Congestion" has become an oft-cited reason for such delays.

My return journey is usually on the 1727 Victoria to Ore service, which regularly and progressively loses time. It is scheduled to arrive into Bexhill at 19.17 but more often than not it arrives several minutes later. I don't know exactly where the time is lost, however progress is generally slow after Haywards Heath and/or Lewes. I

understand this is due to the 1723 London Bridge to Eastbourne service running late in front, and in turn the Brighton-Ashford service running behind is delayed also. Delays are rarely acknowledged by train crew.

I have recorded 11 significant delays on both services between 12 - 27 November: Reasons stated include signalling problems, congestion, over-running engineering works and other late-running trains in front.

**Mark Chawner**

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### THE SOUTH COAST MAINLINE CONCEPT

**Richard Tilden Smith** of the East Sussex Rail Alliance (ESRA) shares his thoughts.

Rail is at last on the Agenda....!

There has been a big turnaround this year, in attitudes if nothing else, on the back of sustained action by the South Coast's stakeholder groups. The long-awaited arrival of East Sussex County Council's Rail Development Plan – pressing for electrification and dualling of Marshlink and Uckfield-Lewes lines – suggests more than a chink of light on the plight of the South Coast lines' Cinderella status.

Led by strategists in the East Sussex Rail Alliance, and energetically advanced by Ray Chapman and colleagues, the concerns of South Coast communities have translated into the vision of a through corridor from Exeter to Ashford and HS1: The South Coast Main Line. There is now a very real prospect that its key module, The Marshlink Upgrade, might actually get the funding it deserves to fulfil its potential. Much has turned on the support of Parliamentary and County Members who have shifted from "Oh No, not that old chestnut...." to "We now see a do-able project which can be funded and bring big benefits to our travelling public as an economic driver to expand commercial development, tackle excessive unemployment, and reduce economic deprivation".

All credit to Cllr Rupert Simmons, ESCC's Cabinet Member for Economic Development, for driving a new realisation that railways really are economic re-generators. ESCC substantially endorses the South Coast Main Line concept, drawn from shelved SOCOMMS proposals by Halcrow in 2002. The SCML is also now matched to the funding aspirations of SELEP, whose transport funding arm has the Marshlink upgrade and Willingdon Chord re-instatement as its top priorities.

Network Rail is chipping away at the old block signalling system through the installation of new signals between St Leonards and Lewes, although commissioning has been postponed until April 2014 due to a lack of skilled signalling engineers nationally. Nevertheless the real need remains to upgrade the track itself and raise line speeds. Bexhill to Brighton - just 30 miles - takes an hour or longer.

24<sup>th</sup> December is the deadline for bids for the new Thameslink Southern Great Northern franchise, while 2015 sees the demise of Southern as an independent operator. Our hope rests with the determination of Tim Robinson, recently appointed MD of Network Rail's Sussex Lines. While his biggest challenge remains the Brighton Main Line's capacity and reliability – which impacts on all the Sussex coastal lines - he supports the logic of SCML.

Finally the arrival of a prestigious University College London engineering team to undertake a study of the route, and due to report on the development of fast and reliable services between Coast, Capital and Channel Tunnel next June, increases the momentum still further in the New Year. So we will have much more to tell.

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## NEWS IN BRIEF

**WINTER TIMETABLE:** The new winter timetable came into effect on 8.12.13. There are no significant changes to local services for better or worse. We remain especially concerned about patchy performance in the evening peak. We will continue to scrutinise the situation, and with renewed vigour from April when the new signalling system is commissioned.

**SOUTHEASTERN DEC 2014 TIMETABLE CONSULTATION:** At the time of writing we have just recently received notification of planned changes to trains on the Hastings Line as a result of the works at London Bridge. Further details remain to be clarified, but BRAG and SHRIMP are concerned by a specific proposal to divert a key business train, the 06.39 Ore – Cannon St, into Charing Cross. We shall be taking this matter forward in the New Year.

**FARE INCREASES:** Annual fare increases take effect on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2014. The government has capped these at an average of 3.1% which is relatively modest compared with recent years. Remember too, that there are often ways to save money, including using a Railcard or buying a season ticket for multiple journeys, as well as operator-specific products such as Daysave, Advance and Super Off-Peak tickets. It always pays to research different options over the internet. BRAG recommends buying direct from the ticket office; or online at either [southernrailway.com](http://southernrailway.com) or [southeasternrailway.co.uk](http://southeasternrailway.co.uk). Avoid third party booking agents, who charge commission and delivery fees.

**EXTENSION OF THE KEY:** Southern is the first train company in the UK to enable the existing Oyster system to allow its passengers to travel into London using its smart card - The Key. You can now purchase Weekly, Monthly and Annual Season tickets from local stations for journeys to London Victoria, London Bridge, Clapham Junction and East Croydon, and day and season tickets along the East and West Coastways. Fares are the same as for conventional paper tickets. Unfortunately, the system has not yet been extended east of Bexhill to Hastings, St Leonards and the Marshlink; or on the Southeastern routes to London via Tonbridge and Ashford. For a free card visit [www.southernrailway.com/thekey](http://www.southernrailway.com/thekey).

**DEMISE OF GRUB ON THE GO:** Despite a great deal of work by many people over the last 18 months, the catering service on the Hastings Line went into liquidation at the end of November. Repeated service disruption and weekend engineering works in recent months took their toll and meant that the enterprise simply was not viable. A catering trolley operated by Rail Gourmet continues on Southern services to Victoria.

*Richard Madge*

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## FUTURE MEETINGS

We are delighted to return to Hastings Direct, Conquest House, Collington Avenue, Bexhill for our monthly meetings: A big 'Thank You' to Belinda Fordham, Property Services Manager, for facilitating this.

Our meetings for the first half of 2014 will take place on the following dates:

Mon 13<sup>th</sup> January, Mon 10<sup>th</sup> February, Mon 10<sup>th</sup> March, Mon 14<sup>th</sup> April, Mon 12<sup>th</sup> May, Mon 9<sup>th</sup> June.

All meetings begin at 7pm. New members are always welcome.

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*To contact BRAG, and for membership enquiries, please email [bexraq@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bexraq@yahoo.co.uk)*