
BEXHILL RAIL ACTION GROUP (BRAG)

WINTER 2015 NEWSLETTER

CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

In recent Newsletters I have highlighted the continually expanding range of opportunities and challenges in which BRAG has sought to win advantages for this area of the Sussex Coast. I have also paid full tribute to the expertise and commitment of BRAG Members - without which none of these interventions would be possible.

And now 2015 has turned out to be an extraordinary year for BRAG and all our fellow rail user groups. Once again an expanding agenda has placed additional demands on all of us - and once again Members have responded magnificently.

Later sections of this Newsletter describe the main areas of current activity - my task here is to set the context in which we are now operating. During 2015 the remits of the key "players" whose decisions are critical to BRAG's objectives were up for review.

First, and for us most helpfully, the General Election Result has brought continuity in the key Government personnel on whom our aspirations for High Speed Javelin trains depend. The Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Transport, and Amber Rudd MP (now promoted to the Cabinet) all remain in place. In addition Huw Merriman, the new MP for Bexhill and Battle, has already shown his enormous energy and commitment to deliver this vital project. More generally the election of new MPs for Eastbourne, Lewes and Wealden provides a strong alliance for a more strategic approach to rail investment in this part of Sussex.

Second, Southern Rail has been absorbed into a much larger Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern Franchise operating services over a much wider area. This has led to changes in organisation and personnel. BRAG has immediately made clear our intention to build a constructive relationship with the new Franchise to take forward the issues on which we have been working closely with Southern. We have already welcomed David Scorey to his new appointment as Southern Mainline Passenger Services Director. And we are grateful to Andy Leister, Southern Group Station Manager, for attending a recent BRAG meeting.

The support and goodwill of all these individuals and organisations are vital for achieving BRAG's goals for better rail services and a more prosperous local economy.

When I joined BRAG in 2008 we were energetically defending Bexhill's existing rail services and seeking modest improvements. I would never have guessed that in 2015 we would - to the west - be in close discussions with Gatwick Airport to explore how their expansion plans could improve rail links to the South Coast, and - to the east - be part of the driving force to connect Bexhill to St Pancras by High Speed trains in something like 78 minutes..... So let's see what we can achieve in the next 7 years!

Hugh Sharp
BRAG Chairman

LOBBYING FOR HS1

Working with Bexhill Chamber of Commerce and Southeastern, a lobbying letter has been drawn up which local businesses and organisations may send to an agreed list of key transport, parliamentary and business executives which emphasises the need for HS1 to operate between St. Pancras International and Bexhill via Ashford International. BRAG gave a presentation and lobbying workshop to Chamber members in September, and some letters have already been sent. There will be a renewed push in the New Year. At the same time, a short form of the letter is available for individuals to send – please contact us at bexrag@yahoo.co.uk for a copy.

Anyone who was caught up in the terrible episode of delays and cancellations (more of the latter than the former) during the week of 14th December – which affected both the Victoria and Charing Cross lines – will appreciate all the more how crucial it is that Bexhill have a real, reliable, direct route to London as soon as is feasible.

Yolanda Laybourne

BEXHILL STATION

Staffing levels at the station seem to have been holding at a steadier level, with fewer random ticket office closures than have been reported in the past.

This may be due to the outcry with regard to the unacceptable closure of the ticket office over almost an entire, busy week-end in June, after which it was made clear to Southern that, for all intents and purposes, it had – unbelievably - left responsibility for Bexhill Station in the hands of the operator of the café, something which would not be tolerated again.

After almost 18 months since it re-opened, the café continues to operate well, offering a good choice of refreshments. The operators are friendly and accommodating and the café, together with the excellent team of staff at the booking-office, combine to give a much better welcome to the station than had been the case before positive action was taken. The hanging-baskets and troughs add a pleasant floral touch, and the very imaginative art displays installed on the walls of the ramps leading to both platforms have been much admired and have received many positive comments.

Yolanda Laybourne

GATWICK EXPANSION & WILLINGDON CHORD

BRAG has long identified that construction of a second runway at Gatwick Airport would require and enable major improvements to the local railway infrastructure, including both capacity and resilience of the Brighton Main Line, and also rebuilding of the “Willingdon Chord”. The latter, in conjunction with other changes, would allow faster journey times from Bexhill and Hastings to Gatwick and beyond for travellers, and considerably extend the catchment area for airport staff.

Therefore during 2015 BRAG has made several detailed responses to consultations from both the Airports Commission and Network Rail emphasising the importance of securing improved train services on the East Coastway line, including rebuilding of the Willingdon Chord, as part of any plans that might be approved for a second Gatwick runway, as well as emphasising BRAG’s concern at the

evident lack of adequate long-term planning by Network Rail for East Coastway services. The cessation of train splitting and recoupling at Haywards Heath, and the creation of grade separation at Keymer Junction, have also been highlighted as critical to achieving an appropriate level of journey time improvement from Bexhill and Hastings to Gatwick and London.

The benefits of all these improvements have been discussed with various local interest groups and have found wide support. However, the final report from the Airports Commission identified that on their analysis a third runway at Heathrow has a substantially better overall business case than a second runway at Gatwick, although the latter was still a viable option if arguments against expansion at Heathrow prevailed. The Government for its part has committed to a decision by the end of 2015 and this is now awaited, but pollution concerns at Heathrow remain a highly contentious issue which has recently been suggested as having the potential to cause yet further delay to a decision.

Chris Wheeler

Metrobus Early Bird 380

April saw the launch of the Metrobus Early Bird 380 bus service, providing 2 overnight connections between Hastings, St Leonards, Bexhill and Gatwick Airport when rail services aren't operating. A joint initiative between Metrobus, Gatwick Airport Ltd and Southern Rail, the service was initially targeted at shift-workers needing early arrivals at Gatwick, but has also proved popular with air passengers with early check-ins. In recognition of this emerging passenger market, the service was expanded in mid-November to provide southbound services as well – these also giving connections to Heathfield and Battle.

With low fares (maximum £7 one-way, with some return options) this service is a very welcome addition to our area's transport network. We hope the initiative is supported by a steadily increasing passenger flow, with the longer-term aspiration that other overnight services could be considered. Follow link: www.metrobus.co.uk/travel-info/gatwick-early-bird-services/

Inter-Modal Agreements

Another welcome initiative is the agreement between Southern Rail and Stagecoach buses for the acceptance of valid rail tickets during unplanned disruption, although the process of that agreement is still bedding in. The agreement does not yet extend to services operated by South Eastern Railways, but that is under discussion albeit at an early stage.

Martin Woodfine

NEWS IN BRIEF

Brian Hord CBE: BRAG wishes to pay tribute to our founding Chairman Brian Hord CBE, who died earlier this year. Brian set up BRAG in 2005 to fight a proposal by the then Strategic Rail Authority to discontinue through trains between Bexhill and London. Brian's shrewd political antennae helped us see-off the plan. Brian had a long and distinguished record of public service. He was an MEP

between 1979 - 84; he also chaired a Health Authority and served on the London Regional Passengers' Committee. Prior to relocating to Bexhill, he chaired the Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association. We would like to extend our condolences to Christine and the family.

Dec 2015 Timetable Changes: The winter timetable began on 13th December. There are no major changes to East Coastway, Marshlink and Southeastern High Speed services. Off-peak Bexhill – Victoria services via Haywards Heath see modest journey time improvements, achieved through reorganising stops at smaller stations and reducing time standing at Haywards Heath. Engineering works on the Hastings Line sees many late night services replaced by buses south of Tonbridge on weekdays.

Fares Increase: The 2016 fare increase will be an average of 1.1%. This is based on the RPI. BRAG recognises that the cost of running the railway increases year-on-year, and the alternative is cuts to services and investment. This acceptance is however tempered with the acknowledgement that many people have not had any increase in their salary, and that some 'unregulated' fares in the system often go up by considerably more than the headline figure.

Amber Rudd Rail Summit 2016: This is provisionally scheduled for 18th March in Hastings. Further details to follow. The 2015 summit achieved positive coverage in the regional media, alongside a promotional visit by a Southeastern 'Javelin' train which conveyed guests from Hastings to Eastbourne and back.

Shaw Commission on Future of Network Rail: The closing date for submissions was Christmas Eve. BRAG is very clear that the last thing the rail industry needs at the present time is further top-down restructuring, be it fragmentation of infrastructure operations or privatisation. Stakeholders need to focus their energies towards making the existing system work.

Car Park Ticket Machines on the Hastings Line: Congratulations to Committee member Chris Wheeler for successful pursuit of a complaint via the Office of Rail Regulation. Car park ticket machines at Hastings line stations have now been upgraded to take the newer 5p and 10p coins. Previously, the failure of Southeastern's contractor to address this led to travellers paying over the odds because of the machines' selectivity as to which coins they would accept AND their inability to give change.

New Facebook page: Keep up-to-date via our Facebook page www.facebook.com/bexhillrailactiongroup

Richard Madge

New Members are always welcome. Please contact our Treasurer and Membership Secretary Yolanda Laybourne via the BRAG email address bexrag@yahoo.co.uk

2016 Meetings: As always, we are grateful to Hastings Direct for hosting us. We meet the second Monday of the month, 7pm at Hastings Direct, Conquest House, Collington Avenue, Bexhill. Meetings will therefore be as follows: 11 Jan, 8 Feb, 14 Mar, 11 Apr, 9 May, 13 Jun, 11 Jul, 8 Aug, 12 Sep, 10 Oct, 12 Nov. The December meeting will be an informal Christmas meal at a local hostelry.