
BEXHILL RAIL ACTION GROUP (BRAG)

NEWSLETTER SPRING 2012

Spring is here once more, and with it the re-opened and re-furbished railway between Hastings and Ashford. After 9 weeks of bus journeys it is good to have our connection with Kent and HS1 back..... Policy-wise, recent announcements have been made by the Department for Transport indicating its intention to re-let both the South Central (Southern), Thameslink and Southeastern franchises from 2014, with major network change planned. Meanwhile, the McNulty Report (see newsletters *passim*) is cited by the government as a springboard for further unspecified structural change in the rail industry. As ever, the devil is in the detail and BRAG will take a cautious but constructive approach.

TIMETABLE CHANGES

Southern has informed us that there are no significant timetable changes affecting services from Bexhill in the new timetable, which comes into operation on 19th May.

We have contacted Eurostar to request details of any alterations to their timetables, which change on 9th July. We have not had a response, but test bookings on their website indicate that services from Ashford International will continue to much the same pattern this summer as in previous years i.e. 3 trains each way to/from Paris, 1 train to/from Brussels, a service most days to/from Disneyland Paris, and a Saturday-only summer service to/from Avignon.

MARSHLINK RE-OPENING

We are pleased to note that the Marshlink line between Hastings and Ashford re-opened on 11th March after a 9 week closure to undertake work to Ore Tunnel, and other track improvements. Of note is that a 20mph speed limit south of Ashford has also been lifted. We hope that this is the start of ongoing incremental improvements on this increasingly important route.

Regular users of the service to Rye and Ashford can take advantage of a half-price offer on season tickets if bought before 9th April. Casual users may also save 50%, but the shine is taken off this by engineering works over the long Easter weekend, with trains again being replaced by buses.

MEETING WITH PAUL WYBORN, AREA MANAGER

Paul is Area Manager for the East Coastway and Marshlink, and we were delighted to welcome him to our meeting on 12th March, and to raise local issues with him. Paul confirmed that Southern is to trial its new 'Key' card on the East Coastway between Brighton and Bexhill in the near future, but is not able to extend the scheme eastwards to Hastings and Ashford because Hastings and St Leonards Warrior Square stations are operated by Southeastern. However, the technology - called ITSO - is a national one, so it is likely that this will be extended to Southeastern in the future as part of the next franchise round.

Southern is also considering the possibility of other new products to suit evolutions in lifestyle whereby users work part-time, from home or otherwise do not necessarily travel to their office base every day. This could include a 'carnet' type system where a number of journeys can be pre-purchased, and a 3-day weekly season ticket. We await further details with interest.

RE-FRANCHISING

The DfT announced in January that it intends to re-let the Southern, Thameslink and Southeastern franchises from late 2013 or early 2014.

The East Sussex Rail Alliance, of which BRAG is a member, has produced papers detailing its broad expectations of the new franchises, and these can be viewed both on the BRAG website and on the ESRA website www.eastsussexrail.org.uk.

Formal consultations are expected to be launched in April or May, and BRAG along with partner rail groups in ESRA will be making detailed local submissions.

In brief, the current 3 franchises will be replaced by two new ones:

1. A new Southeastern franchise, similar to the existing network but likely to have the inner suburban services removed and operated by Transport for London (TfL).
2. A combined Southern and Thameslink franchise – again minus the inner suburban services – but incorporating all the Southern outer suburban and coastal services at present, as well as the Thameslink route to Bedford and additional services on the Great Northern route – likely to be Peterborough, Cambridge and Kings Lynn.

It is the second franchise that BRAG is likely to be focussing on. This will be a very large network indeed, with our services likely to be integrated into the new business from around 2017 but possibly sooner. The ESRA document details many of our aspirations and concerns. There are likely to be opportunities for service improvements arising from this re-drawing of the franchise map, including an end to the current insanity of two operators both aspiring to run 4 trains an hour each

between London and Brighton, to the exclusion of everywhere else on the East and West Sussex coast. However, there are also likely to be dangers, including a further attempt to downgrade the through coastal service between Brighton and Ashford, and various threats towards cheap off-peak fares. We will be watching!

MCNULTY – FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

In February, the government published a paper in response to the McNulty Review. At the present time, this is short on detail and long on speculation. The focus is on reducing the cost of running the railway and providing a better service. We will have to see whether these two goals are mutually attainable. Benefits could include easier ticketing using a new electronic system, and tickets being available from a wider range of outlets. Dangers include de-staffing of stations and even greater 'demand-pricing' to force users off the railway at peak times.

NORMANS BAY

The railway is absolutely vital to this small community. Plans to automate the level crossing as part of the East Coastway re-signalling in 2013 will also have a significant impact on the village.

The population of Normans Bay swells in the summer months due to the two large caravan sites there, yet at present there is no Sunday service. BRAG will be working with residents and the train operator to see how this situation could be remedied, possibly by some summer Sunday Victoria services calling at the station on a trial basis in the future.

REV. FRANCIS MADGE (1935 – 2012)

It is with sadness we record the death of Francis. He died on 14th March after a short illness. He was a loyal BRAG member for a number of years, and railways were his next greatest passion after his vocation.

NEW MEMBERS

We are delighted to welcome Sanna Jensen and Yolanda Laybourne as new members. Sanna works in the rail industry and has specialist knowledge of signalling and high-speed rail. Yolanda works in re-generation and community development projects.

If you would like to join BRAG or know of anybody else who might be interested, please contact our Treasurer Martin Woodfine at bexrag@yahoo.co.uk. Annual membership is £5.

BARGAIN CORNER

Southern has extended two of its current offers, both of which may be booked up to 12 weeks in advance:

- 10% reduction on Off Peak tickets
- 34% off Advanced tickets

Both must be booked online by 15th April at www.southernrailway.com

Southeastern has a 25% off deal on many off-peak tickets if bought before 15th April. Not valid from Bexhill and Coastway stations, but can be used from Hastings/St Leonards stations, Crowhurst and stations via Battle. www.southeasternrailway.co.uk.

**Offer details understood to be correct at time of writing.*

FUTURE MEETINGS

Due to ongoing building and refurbishment work, we are unable to meet at our regular venue, Hastings Direct, until further notice. We are meeting instead at The Sackville bar/restaurant on Bexhill seafront. Our thanks go to the management for offering this venue free of charge, subject to us purchasing refreshments.

The dates of the next three meetings are as follows:

Monday 16th April (a week later than usual due to the Easter Monday public holiday)

Monday 14th May

Monday 11th June

All meetings begin at 7pm and are usually over by 9pm.
