



BEDFORD COMMUTERS ASSOCIATION

March-April 2005

50p (free to members)

WELCOME to the March-April 2005 Newsletter of Bedford Commuters Association.

The new Thameslink station MUST be finished

TRANSPORT Minister Tony McNulty is still refusing to give details of when the new St Pancras Thameslink station will be finished.

This newsletter reported in its last issue the scandal of the station that will be half-built, then lay empty and unusable for years. Every day, after the end of the present blockade, trains from Bedford and Flitwick will run through St Pancras Thameslink without stopping. Passengers will be treated to a view of empty platforms and a concrete shell, but until money is made available for the fixtures and fittings required to make the station usable, no train will be able to stop there. Trains will instead run into the dilapidated Kings Cross Thameslink: a station outlined for demolition.

Nobody thinks this is a good idea except, it seems, for the Department for Transport and the Government Ministers who lead it. They have diverted billions in funding to projects like Crossrail and the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, in preference to finishing off a project that has already been started.

Even the man in charge of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link thinks this is madness. Alan Dyke, MD of Union Railways (North), says: "There is an eight-month blockade and Thameslink passengers aren't going to get a net gain. We would have liked, as promoters of the works, to get the (Thameslink) station open at the same time as the international station. It (St Pancras) is designed as a transport interchange and the key element is the passenger dispersal and the attractiveness of the services with Thameslink. It is a significant disadvantage to Eurostar business that the Thameslink station will not be open." He says there is now no way that the Thameslink station can be open within the next two years.

BCA has been speaking to local MPs about this, and even they have failed to get a straight answer. Patrick Hall MP (Bedford & Kempston) was told by Tony McNulty: "I appreciate the importance that you and your constituents attach to this matter and I can assure you that it is our strategic intention to carry out the fit-out works. The issue is how quickly we can afford to go ahead with these works, given the current financial constraints on the industry."

An indication of the 'current financial constraints on the industry' is given by the £400m the Government has set aside for tidying-up the facade of Kings Cross and building a new ticket hall for the station, to make it look nice for the London 2012 Olympic bid. A new Thameslink station would cost a tiny fraction of this sum.

Mandarins at the Department for Transport told BCA that 'no final decisions have yet been reached' on when the project will get the go-ahead.

BCA believes that enough is enough! Thameslink passengers have been fobbed-off for too long on this subject, and we are asking members to write to Minister for Transport Tony McNulty MP about this. We have included a formatted letter, overleaf, for readers to cut out and send to the Minister. If there are others in your train carriage, household, or social circle who feel strongly about this – give them a photocopy of the letter to send off to the minister. Remember, you don't need to attach any postage when writing to MPs at the House of Commons, and the more people who do this the more chance we have of getting this ridiculous situation to come to an end.

Channel Tunnel Rail Link latest: www.ctrl.co.uk

To: Tony McNulty MP, Minister for Transport, House of Commons, Palace of Westminster, London SW1A 0AA.

Dear Mr McNulty,

Thameslink passengers are enduring eight months of disruption to their services because of work on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. But this work will be of no benefit to these passengers, unless work is finished on the new St Pancras Thameslink station. Your department has been unable to provide any assurances of when this work will be done, and the result will be a journey through an unfinished and unusable station for thousands of passengers every day for some years to come.

I urge you to make funds available for the completion of this work immediately.

Yours sincerely,

Name: _____

Address: _____

New trains break disability law?

IN SEPTEMBER last year we reported a plethora of problems with MML's shiny, expensive new Meridian trains. Well, there is one more problem – they may well break the law. The Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998 set down the level of dedicated facilities which should be made available in all new trains for the use of disabled passengers. These say (Regulation 8.1): 'Not less than 10% of the seats in a regulated rail vehicle, or eight seats (whichever is the lesser), shall be designated by signs (showing they are) priority seats for the use of disabled persons'. This means at least one in ten seats in each Meridian carriage must be accompanied by signs saying that they are there for the priority use of disabled passengers. This is not the case and, particularly significantly, there is no 'disability priority sign' on the seat closest to the wheelchair space in standard class on these trains. BCA contacted MML to ask about this, and the train operator told us that the new trains do comply with the regulations – regardless of whether they have signs saying so or not. This rather misses the point. BCA is continuing discussions with the train operator, and will continue to push MML on this point until it complies with the statutory Regulations. Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations: www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/si/si1998/19982456.htm

The £64 question – the follow-up

MEMBERS will recall the story in the last issue of this newsletter about how commuters buying a Bedford to London annual season ticket were paying more than those commuting from stations on the Marston Vale line and changing at Bedford. In short, a BCA investigation found that the ticket for the longer journey was £64 per year cheaper, as long as the journey was made via Bedford. We checked with Thameslink whether people commuting from Bedford to London could buy the cheaper ticket and were told 'yes'. We were then told that Thameslink had made a mistake in pricing this ticket, and was likely to increase the fare accordingly. All very unsatisfactory. Well, Thameslink has now told us exactly what it plans to do with fares on this route: and the result is a situation which is far-from ideal. Thameslink Customer Strategy Manager Ginny Chart said: "There are only five people on the Marston Vale Line who purchase 'any permitted route' (ie. via Bedford) point-to-point season tickets to London Terminals. They have been able to take advantage of a lower fare than that from Bedford, due to an error in the complex fares-setting process, since January 2004. At the present weekly rate, this amounts to a differential

of £1.60 (Ed's note: £64.00 on an annual ticket). Our mistake in not aligning the Thameslink-owned 'any permitted route' season ticket prices on the Marston Vale line with those from Bedford was due to the revenue from the flow being so small that it simply got missed.

"In order to rectify the current situation, which we must, Thameslink has a number of options. We could: (1) ask Silverlink to take this flow away from us, meaning Silverlink would set future fares; (2) reverse the error entirely, which would result in raising the Marston Vale fare above that of Bedford; (3) raise the Marston Vale fare to the same level as Bedford.

"We do not consider option (1) to be viable. We are left with options (2) and (3). We believe option (3) to be the most equitable way forward. It is the proposal which is currently with the SRA for agreement. In the meantime, your members may take advantage of this error should they so wish, by purchasing their weekly or longer season ticket to London Terminals from Kempston Hardwick or similar (Ed's note: you can buy such a ticket at Bedford station). However, this ticket may not work in the barriers at Bedford, and an extra £1.60 per week may be a small price to pay to avoid this inconvenience."

This Thameslink response does, rather conveniently for the train operator, neglect to mention a fourth option: that the Bedford fare be reduced so that it is in-line with the Marston Vale one, and that Thameslink shareholders foot the bill for this from their 'remarkable' revenues (see the last issue of this newsletter for details of these). But, for the time at least (until the SRA issues its judgment on Thameslink's proposal), passengers buying new season tickets on the Bedford to London route (excluding Travelcards) can save themselves £64.00 a year. So long as they don't find using a manually-operated gate rather than a machine-operated one too inconvenient, that is.

What do we want? Information...

THE FREEDOM of Information Act 2000 came into action on 1st January this year, opening up access to information held by UK 'public authorities'. For the first time, members of the public and journalists have a statutory right to obtain information about the workings of Government departments, local authorities, QUANGOs and other organisations providing public services. But not train operating companies (TOCs).

In the drafting of the bill TOCs were overlooked, despite the fact that they collectively receive around £1bn in subsidies every year from the tax-payer for providing public services. Those who drafted the bill decided TOCs were not 'public authorities' despite the fact that Judges, who you'd expect to know a thing or two about legal matters, indicate that they almost certainly are. TOCs are subject to the requirements of the Human Rights Act (which applies only to 'public authorities'), and are believed to be considered 'public authorities' for the purposes of judicial review (although this has not been specifically tested at law since privatisation).

The Department for Constitutional Affairs has informed BCA that it plans to go to consultation shortly on what organisations should be included in a second phase of the Freedom of Information Act. BCA will be responding to this consultation, arguing that TOCs should be included, as it is important that rail users are able to scrutinise the decisions they take which affect the provision of public services. BCA also plans to contact other rail user groups in an attempt to get them on-board with this campaign.

Troublesome timetables

THE END of the blockade means a return to 'normal' – in theory at least. But there are two things that members will need to know about timetables over the late spring and early summer months.

Firstly, because the blockade is due to end on 16th May (and it is still on-time), there will have to be an interim Thameslink timetable in place for four weeks – until the rest of the country is ready to change to the summer timetable in June. Not a major issue – but bear in mind that three different timetables inside five weeks may be more than a bit confusing.

Secondly, we have been made aware by MML that from the start of the new timetable in June it will be moving its last service out of St Pancras each weekday evening to a time 35minutes

earlier than at present. The 2340 train has been very popular in the years it has been in service, running to Bedford, Luton and the majority of stations north. The timing has been perfect for people visiting the theatre or enjoying a meal or drink in the capital. From June, this service will be moved to 2315. BCA has told MML that it is not happy with this change. MML's response has been that if Bedford and Luton passengers aren't happy they can take somebody else's train home.

No timetables... again

THAMESLINK is back to its old tricks of not telling passengers what times its services are running. Recent engineering work has seen the train operator replacing some weekend services between Bedford and Flitwick with buses. The only problem is that it refuses to tell anybody what time these buses are leaving. Such information has been conspicuous by its absence from the Thameslink website, and has not been posed in stations. Even calls to National Rail Enquiries have been of no use, as the service has been providing people with what it knows to be incorrect information (a BCA committee member told a senior manager at National Rail Enquiries that the info was wrong on more than one occasion – the response was that they were aware of this, but were unable to correct it).

It is a requirement of Thameslink's franchise that it must provide timetable details to the public, and by not doing so it is in breach of its franchise – a pretty brave/foolhardy place to be at a time when it is bidding for a franchise renewal. Anybody who has been delayed or missed a train or connection because of Thameslink's failure to produce a timetable can claim compensation from the train operator, on the grounds that it has acted negligently.

Neil Jeffery

WE ARE very sad to report the death of former BCA Chairman, Treasurer and leading-light Neil Jeffery. Neil retired from BCA at our 2002 AGM, and moved to Dorset to enjoy his retirement with his wife Valerie. He died on Saturday 19th February, after collapsing while out walking with friends in the village where he lived.

Arthur Taylor, who succeeded Neil as Chairman, said: "Neil was a great servant to BCA, as well as being a friend to many who commute from Bedford and Flitwick. Although retired from the daily grind, he still kept in touch with us at BCA – letting us know his valued opinions on issues of the day, and remained a member of the Association. We will all miss him; and we have passed out heartfelt sympathies onto Valerie." Anyone who knew Neil and would like to send their condolences to his family can do so by getting in touch with Arthur at the postal address below.

BCA Annual General Meeting – 7.45pm, Tue 15th March, Dom Polski

ALL MEMBERS are invited to attend the AGM of Bedford Commuters Association at 7.45pm on Tuesday 15th March at Dom Polski (next to Bedford station). This is the one opportunity most commuters will get this year to question Thameslink MD Mark Causebrook (who has confirmed he will attend) and senior MML staff on the service they provide, and for which you pay so handsomely. You can also come and ask questions of the BCA committee about their performance over the last year, and plans for the future. A licensed bar and snacks will be available.

We are grateful to Thameslink who have, again, made arrangements for members from Flitwick to travel to and from Bedford for free on the night (don't forget your membership card as proof). Anyone who presents their membership card at Dom Polski on the night will be given a free entry to the prize raffle.

FOR MORE info you can access our website - www.bedfordcommuters.org.uk

If there's something you want to tell us about e-mail - admin@bedfordcommuters.org.uk

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