



ABFLY newsletter

www.abfly.org.uk

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WANTED: NEW EDITOR!

Welcome to the February 2009 issue of the ABFLY newsletter, and a belated Happy New Year!

First of all you will probably notice a change in format since the last edition. This is because our previous editor, Paul Spelzini, has decided to retire from the post. We wish to extend our thanks to Paul for the hard work he has put into the newsletter over the last two years. Of course that now means we are seeking another newsletter editor. I have temporarily taken over the post, but with plenty still to do wearing the Membership Secretary hat, I am keen to pass it on quickly! So if you are interested in taking on this role, please get in touch.

Finally, apologies for the paucity of photos – there was simply too much to say. Future newsletter editors may wish to change that!

David Horton

LONDON MIDLAND: BOTTOM OF PERFORMANCE LEAGUE

London Midland (LM) sits at the bottom of the performance table for London and South East train operators, falling to 71.2% punctuality in the latest figures from Network Rail that cover December 7 – January 3 (period 10). LM is also bottom of regional operators, on 80.9%. The other major West Coast Mainline (WCML) operator, Virgin Trains, is bottom of the long-distance table on 75.9%.

LM explained that its drop in performance was a result of staff sickness, the time taken for December's timetable changes to bed in, and WCML disruption. LM says that its performance is now improving.

ABFLY NEEDS YOU

It's not just Newsletter Editor where ABFLY now has a vacancy. Recently we have been reflecting on our effectiveness as a campaigning organisation and one of the conclusions was the need for a better distribution of workload and more active volunteers.

Out of this came a list of possible 'job descriptions', which we now hope to fill by appealing to you, good members! As well as the traditional roles of Chairman, Treasurer and Membership Secretary (all currently filled), we agreed the need for more activity on the publicity side of things, to keep ABFLY 'in the spotlight' so that branch users and authorities alike 'know we are there'. We need volunteers for the following positions:

- Publicity officer (re-created role)
- Website editor
- Newsletter editor

We would also like to appoint people into specific 'project' roles to take forward ABFLY's lobbying on strategic objectives, such as:

- Higher frequency service
- Late night trains
- Through trains to London
- Bus integration

So if you have a specific interest in one of these projects, and think you would be capable of taking the lead, please do get in touch and we will send you further details of what we think is required. Please contact our chairman, John Webster (details are shown overleaf).

DECEMBER 2008 TIMETABLE: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

The timetable changes which took effect from December 13th – 15th were heralded across the UK rail industry as being one of the most radical shake-ups in living memory, none more so than on the West Coast Main Line (WCML).

As most people are no doubt aware, the WCML is now coming to the end of a very long and very expensive route modernisation, which has been almost 10 years in the making. An entire thesis could be written on the trials, tribulations, successes and failures of this grand venture, but that is something for another day! Needless to say, I'm sure that most users of the Abbey Flyer have, in some form or another, been affected by the unfortunate side effects of this major engineering project over the years, whether it be weekend cancellations, 'bustitution', longer journeys or delays. December 2008 was supposed to be the light at the end of the tunnel. But it didn't quite turn out that way.

London Midland (LM) made much in their publicity about the new timetable, which does in fairness offer more trains per hour stopping at Watford Junction (WJ), new direct services to places such as Stafford, Stoke and Crewe, and increasingly longer trains in the peak as more of their new 'Desiro' trains are delivered from Germany. This is to be applauded.

However, all of this is tempered by the virtual elimination of regular high-speed Virgin Pendolino services from WJ to anywhere except Birmingham New Street. Passengers for Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow are now forced to change at Milton Keynes, Euston or Birmingham. Granted, LM cannot be blamed for the wholesale destruction of direct long-distance journey opportunities from WJ. For that we must thank Virgin Trains and the Department for Transport. But given the loss of these direct trains (which has been well known for a long time), you might expect a greater emphasis on the optimisation of connections at Watford. And that's where LM have disappointed, especially on the Abbey Line.

The change which has caused by far the most aggravation has been the 0830 departure from St Albans Abbey (SAA). This arrives WJ at 0846. Unfortunately, this is just in time to see the tail lights of the 0846 to Euston departing into the distance. The next train is not until 0905, a full 20min wait. There used to be an 0847 and an 0854 – not any more!

We put it to LM that the 0830 ex-St Albans could be brought forward by just 3 mins so that it arrives Watford in time for the 0846. LM's answer to this was that they can't be expected to please everybody, they can't make any changes until May 2009, and anyway that change would give a "substandard connection" (defined as less than 5mins – a mandatory safety requirement).

Another two connections which remarkably seem to have been overlooked are the 0703 and 0745 departures from SAA. These arrive WJ at 0719 and 0801 respectively. Yes, you guessed it, at precisely the same moment that trains leave for Milton Keynes. The 0719 is semi-fast and the 0801 is fast. Northbound customers from the Abbey Line are therefore forced to wait 39 and 10mins respectively for a Milton Keynes connection.

Finally, a number of early-risers have commented that the first weekday departure from SAA could also be brought forward by a few minutes so that it arrives in time to catch the 0633 non-stop service to Euston. This would have the beneficial effect of relieving the 0644 and 0659 'stoppers'. Again, a simple thing that seems to have been overlooked by LM's planners.

All in all it is clear that the first five or six trains of the day need a rethink. ABFLY has put this feedback to London Midland, but unfortunately it looks most unlikely that there will be any changes now before May 2009. Let's just hope they pay much more attention to branch line connections on the second attempt.

Verdict: could do better. *much* better!

NEWS JUST IN: ABBEY LINE DEFIES THE SNOW!

One thing ABFLY rarely has to complain about on the Abbey Line is reliability and punctuality, and London Midland staff have done a superb job recently in upholding the Abbey Line's good reputation.

Despite the recent bout of adverse weather, they have kept the service going (pretty much) as normal, whilst many other parts of the country's transport system was brought to its knees. At the time of writing there is more bad weather to come, so let's not get complacent. Nonetheless, congratulations to London Midland (and Network Rail) for what must have been a challenging time!



Harrington station, left, showing the old solution to the stepping-height problem (foreground) and the new 'hump' (background).

See our story, right, for more details.

REVENUE COLLECTION: ANOTHER TALE OF WOE!

In late November / early December, a rumour spread like wildfire amongst Abbey Flyer regulars. The word from LM's very own conductors was that revenue collection was to be withdrawn from the December timetable change. You can imagine the outrage.

As it turned out, these fears were unfounded. It was a terrible miscommunication. Having quickly sought clarification from LM, ABFLY were informed that the actual plan was to reduce the number of 'Senior Conductors' on board from two to one, in line with LM policy across their entire network. This, however, brought its own problems.

Senior Conductors are required not only to sell and check tickets but also to operate the doors. On older Class 321 stock (which the Abbey Line is now likely to retain for the foreseeable future), this can only be done from the cab, except for a few units which were modified to allow opening and closing from any set of passenger doors on the train. On the branch it is quite impractical for the Conductor to return to his cab at each station and sell tickets in between. There simply isn't time. The consequences of that, as many will know, is a queue at Watford Junction's excess fare window, which adds delay or frustration to your journeys.

Whilst this undoubtedly causes inconvenience to the majority, spare a thought for the elderly and infirm. One gentleman (a member of ABFLY, who shall remain nameless), wrote to me with the following story. He uses the Abbey Flyer on occasions "to maintain independence and to support public transportation", despite being saddled with the need for a walking stick on account of his disability. Following a recent trip to Watford Junction he noted the lack of Conductor, but was "astonished to find that London Midland were able to provide 4 or 5 ticket inspectors blocking the exit to platform 11 to check tickets that are not readily available from the Abbey line stations or Conductor." Not only that, but this "human barricade" could only refer the gentleman back to the onboard conductor to purchase a ticket, thus ensuring he missed his mainline connection.

ABFLY have raised this problem with LM who say that the situation is being "closely monitored" and that, "additional support from revenue protection (ticket sales) teams is also being organized". It is also true that the problem has been eased somewhat by the much-anticipated installation of a ticket machine at St Albans Abbey, but LM have still got an awful lot of work to do to shake off the branch's unfortunate image of being a 'free ride'.

If you use the Abbey Flyer and notice a lack of fare collection, or have been inconvenienced by these changes, tell us about it. E-mail feedback@abfly.org.uk stating the date and time of the train, direction of travel, your boarding and alighting station, and any other particulars.

HIGH HOPES FOR ABBEY STATION

'Outsiders' reading this newsletter may conclude that ABFLY are rather a grumpy lot, always ready to moan and slow to acknowledge the good. Well, one of our key reasons for existence is to monitor and challenge any lowering of standards, so we can be forgiven for that. But let us also celebrate the good things that have been happening on the line, and those that are in the pipeline.

One of the great improvements of the last year has been the transformation of the Abbey station. This work, co-funded by London Midland and Hertfordshire County Council, and largely masterminded by the outgoing Community Rail Officer Alissa Ede, has seen a raft of major and minor improvements to the station which has given it a much more modern, cared-for and friendly atmosphere. Some of the 'headline' investments include a new shelter, new footpath, CCTV, fencing of unsightly areas and the line's first ever permanent ticket machine. This is all part of an effort to make the Abbey station a 'model' for similar small to medium-sized unstaffed stations across the UK.

What a different world this is to 1989, when ABFLY's predecessor "ASTAG" (The Abbey Station Action Group) was formed to fight against proposals for moving the station further down the line and redeveloping the current site for offices. Now is one of those times when we should stop to reflect how lucky we are that ASTAG won the day.

THE HARRINGTON HUMP

Excitingly, there may be more to come at St Albans Abbey.

It is looking increasingly likely that Network Rail have chosen the station as the location for its next trial of an innovative, low-cost solution for closing that awful gap between train and platform. The solution is a glass-reinforced plastic 'hump' which is currently being tested at Harrington station, Cumbria.

Normally it would cost £250,000 to raise a low platform, but this solution, which can be tailor-made for each application, has cost just £65,000 to develop. Network Rail estimates that in future such platforms could be modified for about £25,000 each. Watch this space!

CONTACT DETAILS

If you have a complaint to make about London Midland, write to:

Customer Relations
London Midland
PO Box 4323
Birmingham
B2 4JB.

E-mail: comments@londonmidland.com

Do also keep ABFLY informed of any complaints by sending a copy of your letters to either of the addresses below or BCC ("Blind carbon copy") your e-mails to feedback@abfly.org.uk.

Enquiries about vacant volunteer roles or general ABFLY matters should be addressed to the chairman:

John Webster
17 Faircross Way
St Albans
AL1 4RT.

E-mail: chairman@abfly.org.uk
Tel: 01727 752613.

Membership enquiries should be directed to:

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