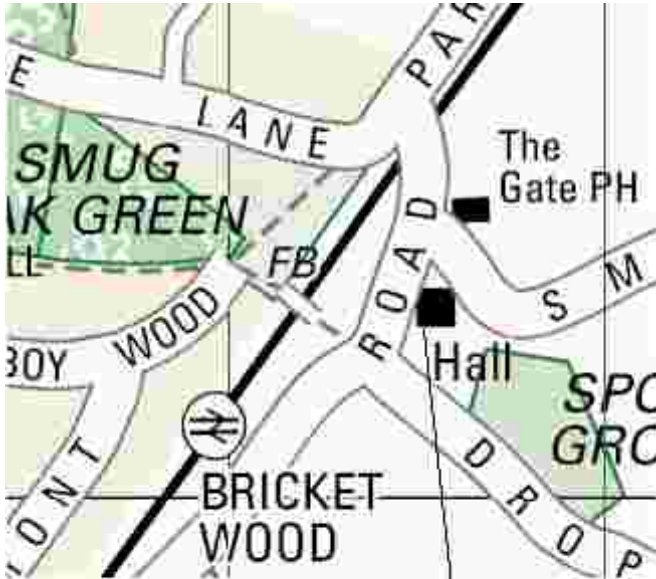




ABFLY newsletter

www.abfly.org.uk

Number 44, May 2009



St Stephens Parish Centre

Venue: St Stephens Parish Centre, Bricket Wood
(3 mins walk from train station)

MEMBERS' MEETING

(followed by short AGM)

Tuesday 2nd June

18:45 for 19:30 start

In attendance:

Youssef Cockbaine

Stakeholder Relations Manager, London Midland

Mike Haigh

Business Strategy Director, London Midland

New members may join at the door

Annual subscription £3.00 per household

For agenda items please contact in advance:

John Webster (chairman), 17 Faircross Way, St Albans, AL1 4RT.
Phone: 01727 752613. E-mail: john.w.webster@ntlworld.com

LITTLE CHANGE IN MAY 2009 TIMETABLE

Readers of our January 2009 newsletter will recall that the December 2008 timetable changes were far from satisfactory for users of the Abbey Line. This was particularly true for weekday Watford-bound commuters hoping to catch onward connections at the Junction. London Midland seems to be very good at timetabling for mainline trains to leave at precisely the moment an Abbey Line train is due to arrive. This happens no less than three times during the morning peak; the 0846 to Euston, the 0719 to Milton Keynes, and the 0801 to Rugby.

It was the 0846 that caused the majority of complaints to ABFLY. For Abbey Line users wishing to go onwards to London, missing that connection means a 20-minute wait for the next train (0905). This seriously undermines the competitiveness of the branch – more than a dozen ABFLY members have said that they will consider using Thameslink instead, yet nothing will change in May. London Midland maintain that they are hamstrung by the priority given to Virgin Trains on the mainline, and the requirement for a minimum 3-minute 'safe change' allowance at Watford Junction. But in any case, it is doubtful whether our protestations were ever taken seriously, LM citing on a number of occasions the fact that they "only received five complaints" about the issue through their Customer Relations department.

Speaking of complaints, even the Watford MP Claire Ward became involved, earlier this year, publicly castigating London Midland for their dismal performance and overcrowding. In late March Ms Ward claimed victory for her 'better trains' campaign, when London Midland pledged to implement nine new 'bounce back' services from Watford Junction to London Euston (five in the morning and four in the evening). These were due to call at Bushey and Harrow & Wealdstone on the way to Euston, then return, non-stop, to Watford. They would create (it was claimed at the time) "as many as 2500 extra seats per day". Sadly, only ONE of these new services will be introduced this month; the 0803 departure from Watford (which will at least be an 8-car train), although more are promised for December.

To finish on a more positive note, the Community Rail Partnership is well aware of the unhappiness over the connections issue and want to work with both ABFLY and LM to make sure these problems are ultimately addressed to the satisfaction of everybody concerned. To that end, a one-day 'workshop' is being planned which will include a session on timetabling. ABFLY will very much be part of this process. **Please also attend our Members Meeting on 2nd June if you have strong feelings about this issue. Representatives from London Midland will be in attendance. Details above.**

ABBEY STATION WILL GET THE HUMP

Network Rail and the Department for Transport have confirmed to the Community Rail Partnership that St Albans Abbey station will indeed be the location of the next experimental platform-raising 'hump' as featured in our last newsletter, and that it should be installed by the autumn.

The glass reinforced plastic hump, currently on trial at Harrington station in Cumbria, could be the solution to the Abbey station's very large stepping distance, a long-awaited accessibility improvement at the station, especially for the elderly and infirm. Although the stepping distance at St Albans Abbey is reportedly not as bad as that at Harrington, the 'hump' will look something like this (Harrington's previous solution, a set of steps, is shown in the foreground!)



WHAT MONEY CAN BUY

Readers will remember that in March 2008 the Department for Transport concluded another study into the possibility of reinstating the passing loop at Bricket Wood. This would have allowed for a higher frequency of operation on the branch, thus making the 'product' much more attractive than it currently is.

After some initial optimism, the conclusion of the study was that a positive business case does not exist. Although ABFLY has asked many times to see the figures to support this conclusion, the information has not been forthcoming because of 'commercial sensitivities'.

Meanwhile, on a branch line in Cornwall, they have, well, gone ahead and done it. To the right, you can see a picture of the new passing loop at Penryn, on the picturesque Truro-Falmouth branch. The cost of this 440-yd addition to the National Rail Network? A mere £7million. A strong business case? We doubt it. But perhaps having the correct benefit-to-cost ratio is less important when your project is backed by £4.67 million of funding from the European Union.



MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY TO STEP DOWN (a note from David Horton)

After the next Members Meeting on 2nd June, I will step down as Membership Secretary, after five years of service. It has been a pleasure being involved with the Abbey Line for this period of time, during which we've witnessed a number of momentous things; the birth of the Community Rail Partnership, the 150th Anniversary celebrations, and the passing of Silverlink, to name but a few.

I am leaving the post because 18 months ago I moved well away from the area (to Derbyshire) and other things now take priority. I can no longer devote the kind of energy I once did to the group, so I feel that now is the time to scale back, but not entirely! Because, with the blessing of the group, I will take over as permanent Newsletter Editor, since this involves far fewer hours per month, and I've rather enjoyed doing it on a 'temporary' basis!

I would like to say I step down from Membership Secretary with membership in a stronger position than when I first joined, but it's sad to say that the number of renewals and new members have declined, active volunteers have diminished, whilst the number of jobs that need doing has increased! So, on behalf of the rest of the ABFLY committee, I would like to issue this appeal:

PLEASE COME FORWARD if you value the Abbey Line and its future. Without ABFLY, in the 1990s the line may have been converted to a guided busway, or even closed altogether. Thankfully that threat no longer hangs over our heads, but we should always be vigilant. The attitude towards 'Community' railways (as branch lines and rural routes are often now labelled) is currently very positive; they are well valued by politicians and the public alike. But things could all change very quickly under a new administration, burdened by record public debt. So we should never rest on our laurels.

Therefore, ABFLY needs to maintain its veracity and effectiveness as a campaigning organisation. **We need volunteers to come forward in the following areas:**

- Membership secretary
- Publicity officer
- Website editor

We would also like to recruit people into specific 'project' roles to take forward ABFLY's more strategic objectives, such as a higher frequency service, late night trains and through trains to London. You don't need to have experience in the rail industry or a particular skill, just an inquisitive mind, persistence and a bit of charm! The role of the 'project manager', as we see it, would be to build a picture of the current situation, come up to speed on previous studies / correspondence, build contacts and generally get their issue 'on to the radar' of the policy makers who should be concerned about it.

If you are prompted to 'answer the call', please get in touch either with me or with John Webster, our chairman, using the contact details on the right – we'd be happy to have a chat!

THE 'FIVE MINUTE' RULE

London Midland confirm that the Abbey Line train can be held for up to five minutes at Watford Junction in the event of a late running connection. The decision is taken by 'control' and should be communicated to the on-train staff. This rule is universal; it applies at all times of the day. Please report to us any member of staff who gives you a contradictory statement.

MINI-TIMETABLES

Since there are no changes to the Abbey Line timetable in May, the little green mini-timetables that were issued with the last newsletter will still be valid. If you wish to request some more, either for yourself or a local organisation, please e-mail: crp@hertscc.gov.uk

COMPLAINTS LOG

Please note that ABFLY keep a log of incidents where the standard of service on the Abbey Line has been poor. For example, over-zealous 'right-time' despatching of branch trains when connecting mainline service is less than five minutes late (see above), a lack of revenue collection, delays or cancellations without information, rude staff etc.

The more incidents we record the more evidence we can present to London Midland at our quarterly meetings with them. Even if it happens time and time again, please e-mail feedback@abfly.org.uk stating time, date, description of the incident and any staff involved (if applicable). Things will only improve if we can provide "more-than-anecdotal" evidence and gather data on these important issues.

CONTACT DETAILS

To make a complaint about London Midland, write to:

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

E-mail: comments@londonmidland.com

Do also keep ABFLY 'in the loop' 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.

General enquiries on ABFLY matters:

John Webster, 17 Faircross Way, St Albans, AL1 4RT.

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

Membership enquiries:

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E-mail: membership@abfly.org.uk
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