



The Railway Consultancy Ltd

Specialists in Planning Economics and Management

By e-mail

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Dear John,

Re: Abbey Line Surveys, Spring 2010

This note reports our latest counts of rail patronage on the St Albans Abbey branch, together with the results of the on-train passenger survey carried out in the same format as last May. The main passenger counts on weekday and weekend trains were conducted on 11/12 May and 08/09 May respectively, although one survey shift was deliberately carried out on Sunday 16th, and one train had to be re-surveyed on Thurs 13th because it was cancelled the previous day. The first few trains on Sat 8th May ran a few minutes late because of a compressor fault on the train, but otherwise the service ran well. Full details of the data collected can be found in the attached spreadsheet.

Surveying Methods

The method used for the surveys included boarding and alighting passenger counts at each station in each direction. In some cases, passengers boarded Eastbound services at Park Street in order to avoid simply waiting for the train to go to St Albans and come back again; the figures have been adjusted to reflect the real trips made by these passengers.

Counts were supplemented by survey data from face to face interviews with passengers, capturing their travel purpose and ticket type, as well as asking about late evening travel patterns and the method of onward or inward travel at St Albans Abbey.

Passenger Counts

Overall, the number of passengers observed during the counts as travelling on the Abbey Line increased by 1% between October 2009 and May 2010. A simple comparison with the May 2009 counts suggests that weekly patronage is about 3% up on the number recorded at the same period last year. Most of these changes can be attributed to weekend traffic, as weekday travel has remained fairly constant. Taking a more historical perspective, it can also be seen that there has been an overall increase in traffic of almost 20% since we began this programme of surveys in May 2006 (see Figure 1).

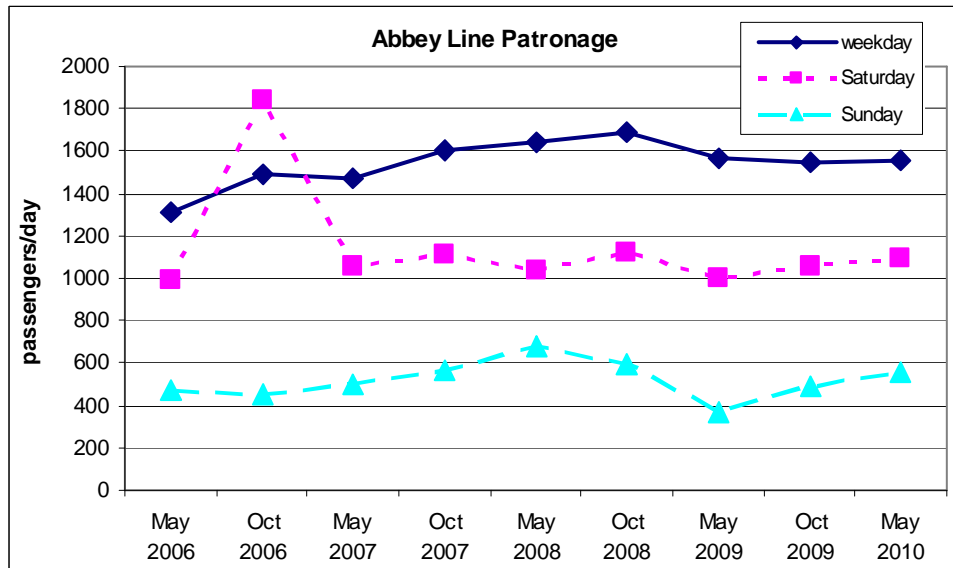


Figure 1. Comparison of Recent Patronage Figures, Abbey Line

Weekday traffic

This is virtually unchanged since May 2009, at 1554 boarders per day, which suggests that the impacts of the economic recession have bottomed out. The current value is also more or less unchanged since October 2009; however, one might put a more positive 'spin' on this, because traffic in May is often somewhat (e.g. several percentage points) lower than that in October, which is a month of maximum commuting and educational traffic.

The average train load remains at 22 passengers, again similar to the last two surveys in May and October 2009. As ever, the busiest train is in the morning: 134 passengers alighted from the 0742 ex St. Albans Abbey, when it arrived at Watford Junction at 07:58. It is noticeable that the later trains have been getting busier over the last year, whilst the earlier trains have been getting quieter; this may be the result of changes in the levels of (un)employment across different sectors of the economy enjoying different fortunes.

Train arriving in Watford at:	07:19	08:01	08:46	09:38
Passengers alighting Oct 07	93	147	123	45
Passengers alighting May 08	86	175	124	40
Passengers alighting Oct 08	58	151	127	30
Passengers alighting May 09	60	145	104	29
Passengers alighting Oct 09	71	140	84	38
Passengers alighting May 10	59	134	106	40
Change May 09 – May 10	-1 (-1%)	-11 (-8%)	+2 (+2%)	+11(+38%)

Figures 2 and 3 show the allocation of weekday passengers to trains arriving at the two key stations; note how St Albans functions as both an origin and a destination, whilst Watford Jct is overwhelmingly a destination, as in previous surveys.

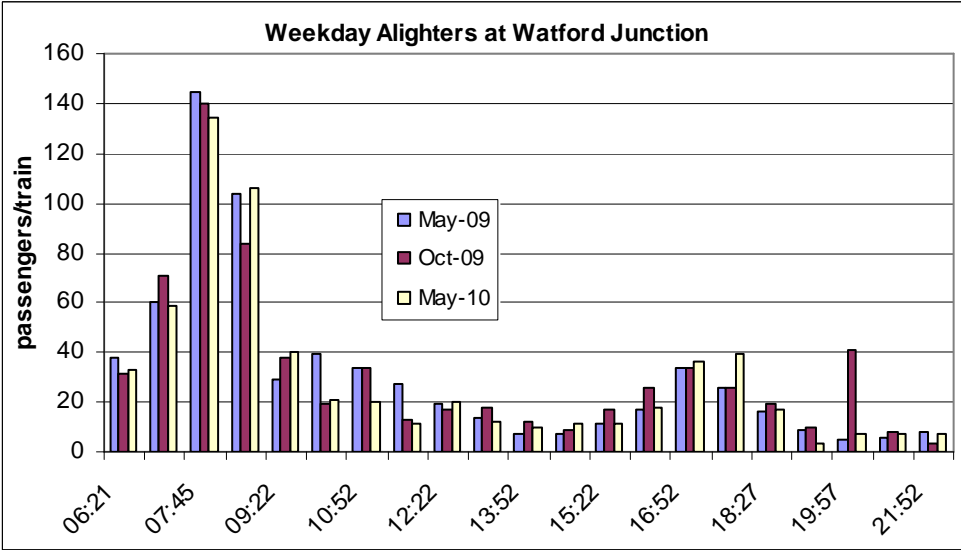


Figure 2. Comparison of Weekday Abbey Line Alighters at Watford Junction

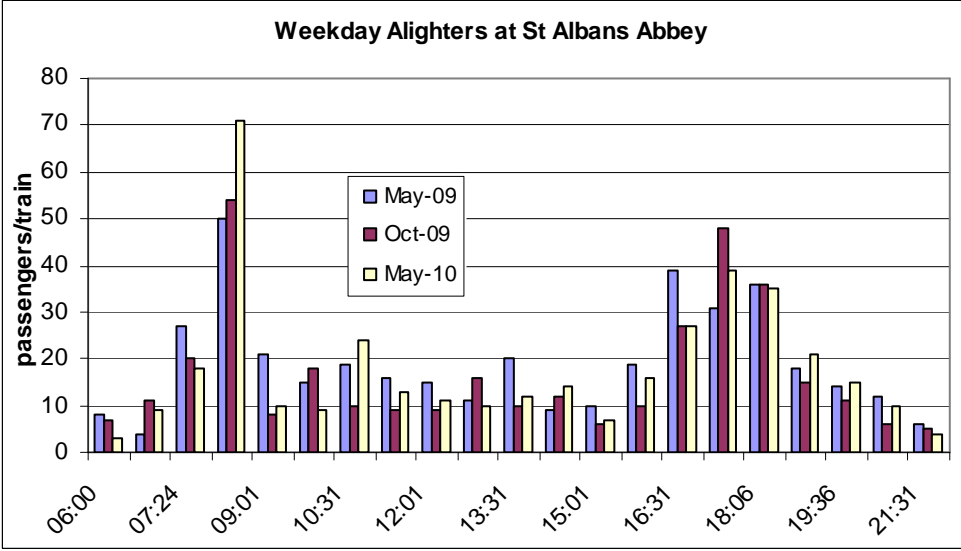


Figure 3. Comparison of Weekday Alighters at St. Albans Abbey

Saturday traffic

Saturday traffic seems to have recovered somewhat from the relatively low level recorded last year, being up 4% on last October and 10% on compared to last May. However, the growth has been in local journeys, not those end-to-end between Watford and St Albans, so the total number of passenger miles changed little (as, of course, did the average Saturday train load, at about 16). Loads were a little more evenly spread than last year, with the highest observed being the 45 on the 13:07 from St Albans.

Sunday traffic

The observed numbers of people travelling on Sunday recovered strongly to a more normal historic level of 552, up 13% on October 2009 and no less than 49% since May 2009, which can now be seen to have been an unusually-low figure. The average trainload is back up to 12, with several trains having 23-25 passengers on board at some stage of their journey. Whilst one cannot be sure of the reason for the renaissance of Sunday patronage, we note that weekend engineering work on the West Coast Main Line is now much reduced upon completion of the major projects.

Annual Patronage Estimate

Our best estimate of current annual patronage is as set out below. Factors are required to gross up one-off counts to the annual figures. A factor of 245 has been used for weekdays, which is slightly less than the actual number of weekdays per year, because a number of these (e.g. between Christmas and New Year) are particularly quiet. A factor of 56 has been used for Sundays, which includes the 6 Bank Holidays on which a service is operated, but also allows for some loss of demand on those Sundays when a substitute bus is used. The annual estimate is therefore as follows:

Weekdays = 1554 * 245 = 380,730

Saturdays = 1094 * 52 = 56,888

Sundays = 552 * 56 = 30,912

This gives a total annual figure of 468,530 but, given the inevitable inaccuracies involved in the surveying and calculation process, we recommend that you take a figure of 465,000 as the best current estimate of demand on the line. This is an 18% increase on the annual patronage estimate of 395,000 derived from our first surveys in May 2006 (compared to a national rail patronage increase of about 15% in the same period, as suggested by ORR's National Rail Trends 0910 quarter 1, published last autumn.)

Conclusions

Weekend (particularly Sunday) traffic has grown somewhat, leading to a small increase in overall ridership of 1%. This is in line with macro-economic figures showing a slow recovery from the recent economic recession. The overall best estimate of annual demand is now 465,000 passengers per annum, Despite this figure being about 10% below the maximum figure from Autumn 2008, annual patronage is still 18% up on our first counts and surveys carried out in May 2006.

Ticket Survey

As in previous Mays, we undertook a survey of a sample of passengers, examining their ticketing arrangements and asking a few background questions about their trip. The sample was scaled up to the relevant daily total at an individual train level, in order to take account of the differing sample proportions and the changes in travel behaviour across the traffic day.

Travel Patterns

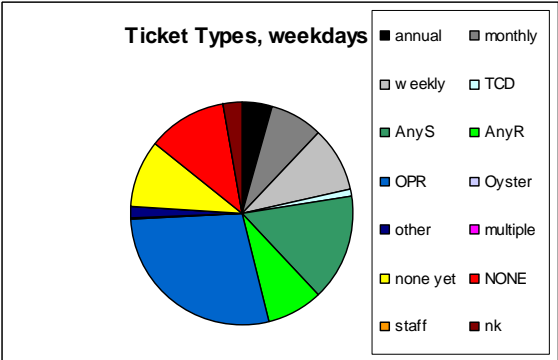
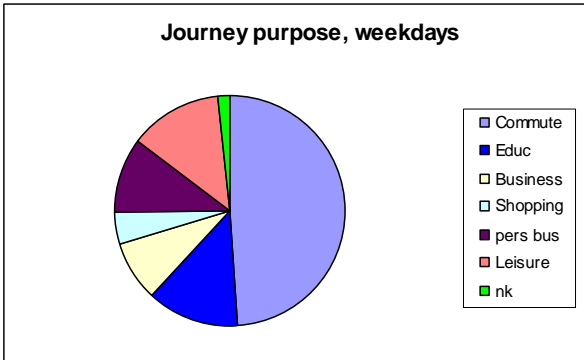
Around a quarter of passengers on the Abbey line travel to destinations elsewhere on the railway network, mostly via Watford Jc but a few changing stations in St Albans. There are fewer interchanging passengers on Saturdays, but a higher proportion on Sundays.

We note that, of those passengers transferring between the Abbey line and the West Coast Main Line, the vast majority are now restricted to travel to/from stations on the Birmingham line, whose services retain stops at Watford Junction. Traffic from other InterCity stations such as Manchester (now requiring a change elsewhere, as well as at Watford Junction) is much down, as an impact of the new WCML timetable structure.

Weekday Journey Purposes & Ticket Types

The distribution of weekday journey purposes has retained the pattern of previous years, with just over half of weekday trips being commuting trips to/from work. Leisure, personal business and to/from school/college trips account for most of the remainder.

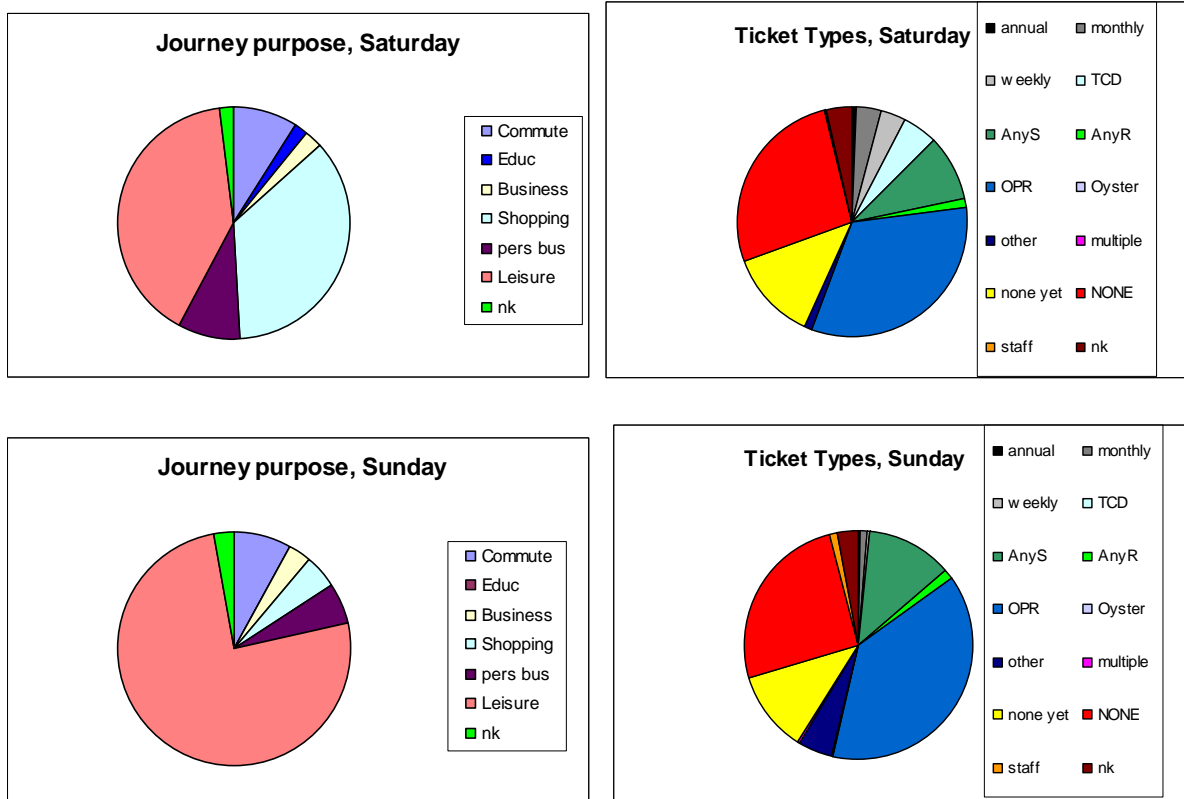
Weekday ticket types include use of a range of period season tickets, with many Anytime Singles and Offpeak returns; however, the proportion of passengers surveyed without a ticket was higher than in previous years. This year we did encounter guards making a much greater effort to collect fares revenues, but we have retained our categories for “NONE” (where it seemed unlikely at best, that the passenger would be able to buy a ticket in due course) and “none yet” (when there was a reasonable chance of their doing so). However, the requirement for guards to return to the rear cab for every station stop severely limits their ability to collect fares. Clearly, some passengers will be challenged for a ticket later in their journey (e.g. at the barrier at Watford Junction), but those with other destinations along the line may not even have an opportunity to pay. Other passengers are travelling with tickets which they think are valid but which are not e.g. a number of respondents showed RCL staff TfL Oyster tickets, but these are only valid at Watford Junction, and not on the branch itself.



Weekend Journey Purposes & Ticket Types

Journey purposes on Saturdays are much more balanced between commuting, shopping, and leisure purposes, but Sunday is dominated by leisure traffic. We did not distinguish VFR (Visiting Friends & Relatives) trips separately this year.

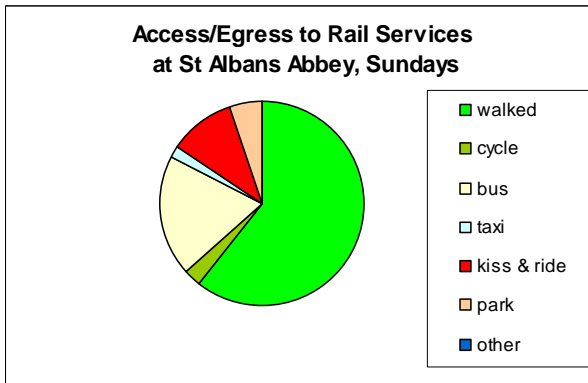
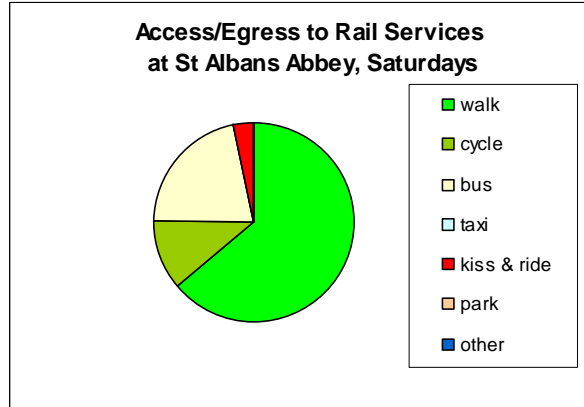
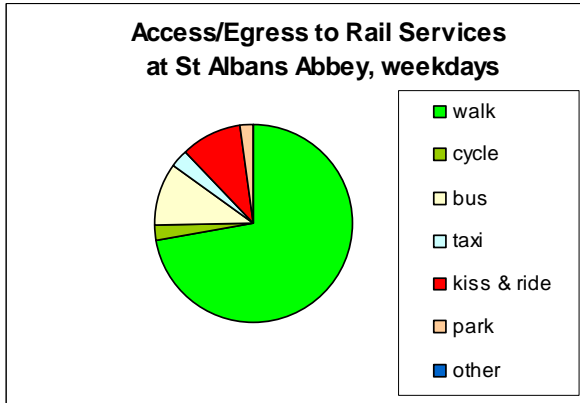
Although Offpeak return tickets dominate weekend traffic, around one-third of weekend passengers had no ticket when surveyed; again, these figures seem to be higher than in previous years. This seems to imply a further deterioration in revenue protection, and in the finances of the line.



Access to/from St Albans

We have also continued to ask a couple of additional questions put into the survey during 2009. To provide a cross-check against Station Travel Plan work being carried out at the two St Albans stations, our ticket survey also included a question for passengers using St Albans Abbey station as to their means of accessing or leaving the station.

The graphs below are coloured largely according to environmental friendliness, with the 'greener' options of walking and cycling contrasting with those using car to access the station. Although about three-quarters of passengers are accessing St Albans Abbey by walking or cycling, there appears to have been a shift from car-based modes towards bus on all days of the week. Of those parking, a number indicated that they parked free on local streets, in order to avoid the charges in the car-park.



Evening Travel

Our last area of enquiry concerned the potential for extra travel during the later evening, after the current service finishes. Our report from last year highlighted the difficulties in providing quantitative estimates of the amount of potential additional travel, and so this year we limited our enquiries to ascertaining the likely time of greatest demand outside the existing scope of service.

There are, of course, demands for travel moreorless throughout the night, but it is not realistic for the railway to provide for all these. Common requests were for various trips until about midnight, but the demand at this time of day generally rises through the week, being low on Mondays and high on Fridays. One later return trip (at c. 2200) might be valuable in general, but there would be almost no justification for running a second trip (at c. 2300) in the earlier part of the week.

Given the current economic climate, running more train services with low loadings is not a realistic option. However, there may be possibilities for running the existing train mileage at different times, in order to carry a greater number of passengers. We would therefore suggest consideration of changes to the timetable. The 2031/2052 round trip from Watford Jc is probably that adding the least value, because the following trip (2131/2152) is known to serve some shift workers finishing at 2200 (and hence would ideally be a few minutes later). Some passengers travel on this last train just because it is the last train, but would like to travel later. Replacing the 2031 round trip with a round trip at 2231 would be more valuable

to passengers, but would need to be advertised properly, in order that the few mid-evening passengers are inconvenienced by the proposed gap in service as little as possible. As there is already a security presence available during the evenings, any such potential problems should be minimised.

Operationally, the later return of the Class 321 unit on the line to Bletchley/Northampton overnight is not thought to be a problem, now that WCML upgrade engineering is largely complete. Whilst longer traffic days do have implications for staff rostering, it is understood that staff currently do not work the line with mid-shift breaks as planned, but limit two of the duties to 4 ½ hour long half-shifts, for their personal convenience. Reinstating three 'normal' shifts (e.g. 0600-0945 & 1115-1245; 0945-1115 & 1245-1630; 1630-2030 & 2130-2330) would enable the more useful service to be operated, and this should be discussed with LM management.

Conclusions

Although care must be taken in interpreting results from this part of the survey, it is clear that there is significant demand for later train services on this line, where the last train currently runs before 2200. The latent demand for later trains could constitute as much as 2% of demand on the line, and more passengers could be carried for the same costs by running a later service in place of one of the mid-evening trains.

Overall Conclusions

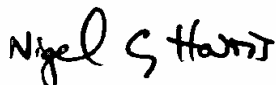
Demand has bottomed out in recent months, and is now 1% higher than last October, and 3% higher than last May. Annual patronage on the line is now estimated at 465,000.

Commuting is the dominant journey purposes on weekdays, and shopping on Saturdays, with significant leisure travel also noticeable. Season tickets, Anytime Singles and (especially at weekends) Offpeak Returns are the most-used ticket types, but the proportion of surveyed passengers without a ticket was over 20% on all days. This probably makes the introduction of additional ticket inspectors financially-positive.

Around three-quarters of passengers accessing/egressing from St Albans Abbey do so on foot or by bicycle, whilst there seems to have been an increase in the bus mode share over the last year.

Evening train services are not particularly well-used, and end before the key time of demand. Replacing a mid-evening return trip with one later than the current last train would lead to an increase in demand for the same operating costs. The CRP should therefore discuss with London Midland whether any such changes to the train service could be implemented.

Yours sincerely,



(Dr) Nigel G Harris,
Managing Director

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