



# The Railway Consultancy Ltd

Specialists in Planning Economics and Management

By e-mail

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Dear John,

Re: Abbey Line Surveys, Autumn 2009

We have now completed our latest counts of rail patronage on the St Albans Abbey branch, along the length of the line to and from Watford Junction. We undertook passenger counts earlier this month on Tuesday afternoon (20<sup>th</sup>), Wednesday morning (21<sup>st</sup>), Saturday (17<sup>th</sup>) and Sunday (18<sup>th</sup>), covering all trains once in the process. Unfortunately, owing to a train failure during the afternoon of Saturday 17<sup>th</sup>, two return journeys had to be resurveyed on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup>, but this is not thought to have introduced any significant error into our work. A summary of our findings is provided in this note, while the full data collected can be found in the attached spreadsheet.

### *Surveying Methods*

The method used for the passenger counts has remained unchanged to that used in previous counting campaigns. As agreed, this exercise included only passenger counts, and no survey on passengers' travel purpose or ticket type.

### *Passenger Counts*

Overall, the number of passengers travelling on the Abbey Line increased by 1% between May 2009 and October 2009, although the increase was partly driven by a number of groups (school parties etc.). Moreover, a simple comparison with the October 2008 counts suggests that weekly patronage is about 8% down on the number recorded last year. Whilst these counts repeat the picture of earlier years, with October being busier than May, the seasonal increase has been nowhere near enough to make up for the year-on-year loss in traffic first identified in our surveys in May 2009.

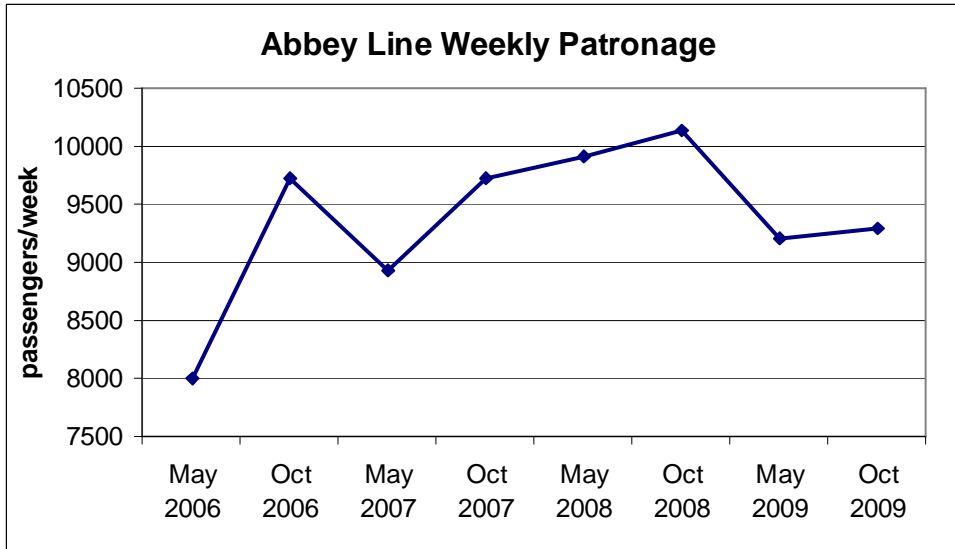


Figure 1. Summary of Abbey Line Patronage 2006-2009

Moreover, as Figure 2 below shows, on a year-on-year basis, traffic has declined on all days of the week. A breakdown of the passenger usage from May 2006 to October 2009 is as follows:

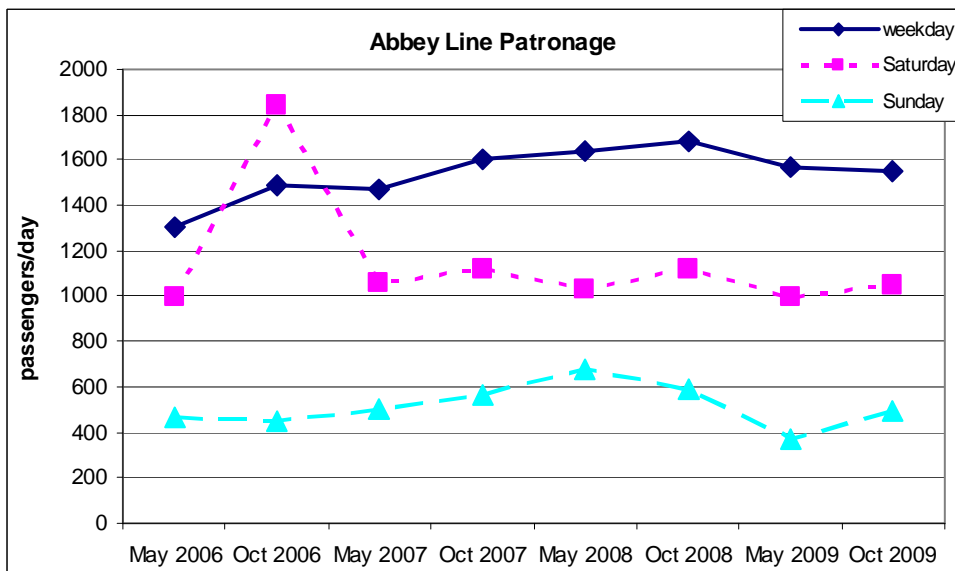


Figure 2. Comparison of Recent Abbey Line Patronage Figures by Day of Week

*Weekday traffic*

An 8% decrease in total boarders to about 1550 per day has been observed between October 2008 and October 2009. This fall takes traffic back to its 2007 level. Whilst the fall in traffic since May 2009 is only 1%, October traffic has historically been higher than that in May, with a greater number of commuting trips. Although we have not undertaken personal surveys to identify the exact reasons for

this fall, the ongoing recession would appear to be the obvious culprit, although local factors (such as the completion of roadworks) may also have contributed.

Whilst the average train load is 23 passengers (down from 26 last year), the busiest train remains in the morning, as has been recorded in previous surveys: 140 passengers alighted from the 0745 ex St. Albans Abbey, when it arrived at Watford Junction at 08:01. However, whilst this is about 10% down from its historical peak, traffic on the following train (0830 from St Albans) has fared much worse, with only 84 passengers alighting at Watford Junction. This might imply that the labour market in Watford has fared worse than that in Central London during the economic recession, or it may be that local traffic issues are relatively more important in affecting rail demand for shorter-distance trips.

Train arriving in Watford at:	07:19	08:01	08:46	09:38
Passengers alighting Oct 08	58	151	127	30
Passengers alighting May 09	60	145	104	29
Passengers alighting Oct 09	71	140	84	38
Change Oct 08 – Oct 09	+13 (+22%)	+11 (-7%)	-43 (-34%)	+8 (+27%)

Figures 3 and 4 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 Jc is overwhelmingly a destination. The reduction in peak trips to Watford Jc is also apparent, as is a large group on an evening train during the recent programme of counts.

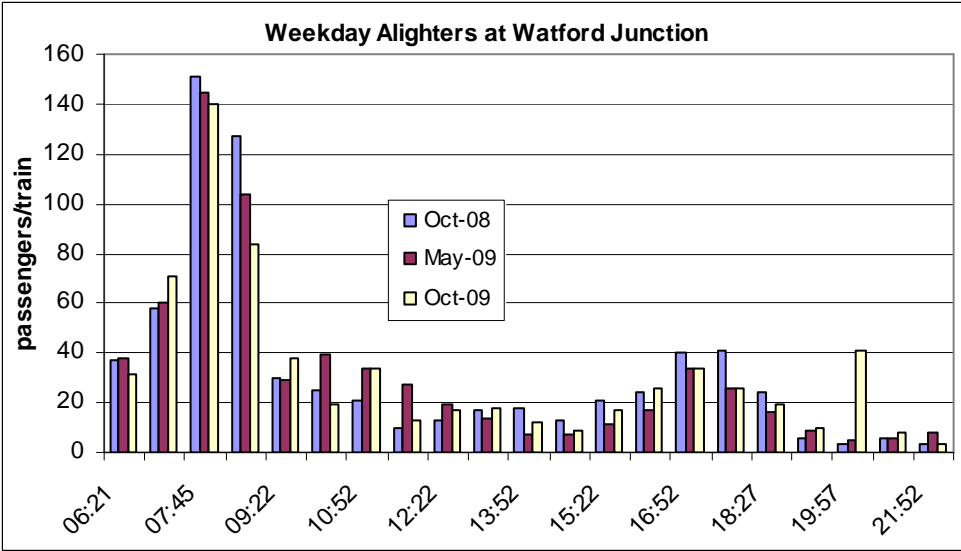


Figure 3. Comparison of Weekday Abbey Line Alighters at Watford Junction

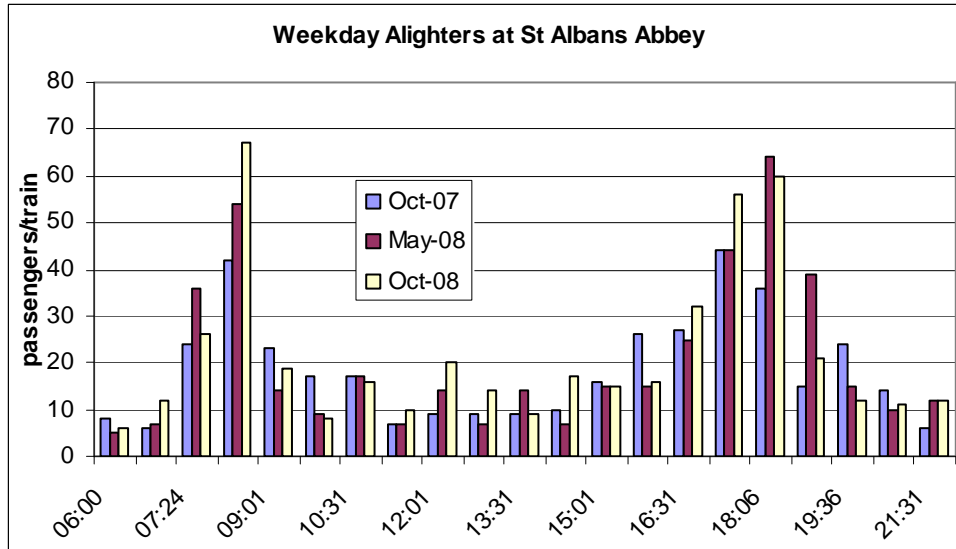


Figure 4. Comparison of Weekday Alighters at St. Albans Abbey

*Saturday traffic*

Other than the obvious ‘spike’ in demand of the fireworks/football events in November 2006, Saturday traffic has been fairly stable over the years (see Figure 1), albeit with a seasonal variation. The increase from May 2009 to October 2009 is about 5% (from 998 to 1052), but the counts reflect a decrease from October 2008 of about 6% (from 1122), which suggests that there is indeed a seasonal impact for Saturday traffic. This is to be expected, with Winter Saturdays normally having more sporting events.

The average Saturday train load has changed little and is around 17 passengers, although the highest observed load was 57 leaving Watford Junction on the 18:46 departure; the timing of this is considerably later than the busiest train observed in the past (which was the 17:16).

*Sunday traffic*

The 489 people travelling on Sunday comprise a decline from October 2008 of no less than 17%, although it is a 32% improvement on the May 2009 count. These ups and downs reflect considerable variability in Sunday loadings, even though our programme of counts has, as always, been organised to avoid as far as possible engineering works on the West Coast Main Line (although, of course, there may be longer-term impacts of such disruption). Nevertheless, the average trainload is still only 12, and no train had a loading of much over 20 passengers.

*Other Comments*

With the exception of the train failure on Saturday 17<sup>th</sup>, where results have been replaced with data from 24<sup>th</sup>, punctuality on the line has generally been good during the period of all the surveys, so is unlikely to have had a significant impact on demand.

As has been the case in previous counts, Watford Junction and St Albans Abbey dominate the passenger flows, with over one-third of passengers starting or ending their journey in Watford Junction, and 30% using St. Albans Abbey. Park Street and How Wood are the quietest stations.

A directional imbalance has reasserted itself, with rather more passengers travelling towards Watford than to St Albans.

Although thorough ticket-checking occurs at the barrier at Watford Junction, and a ticket machine is now available at St Albans Abbey, revenue protection on the branch itself is relatively weak. This may have encouraged some local trips, for instance amongst teenagers.

As in previous years, a significant number of bicycles were observed during the survey, along the whole line. Due to a lack of space in the vestibules of the rolling stock, this level of bike use begins to present a substantial obstruction.

#### *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 =  $1551 * 245 = 380,000$

Saturdays =  $1022 * 52 = 54,700$

Sundays =  $590 * 56 = 27,400$

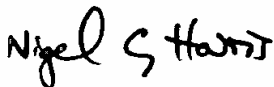
This gives a total annual figure of 462,000 but, given the inevitable inaccuracies involved in the surveying and calculation process, we recommend that you take a figure of 460,000 as the best current estimate of demand on the line. This is a 16% increase on the annual patronage estimate of 395,000 derived from our first surveys in May 2006, (compared to a more general rail patronage increase in the South East of about 7% over the same period, as suggested by ORR's National Rail Trends 0910 quarter 1, published earlier this month). Moreover, Abbey line patronage is now back at a similar level to October 2006, having been higher in the intervening period.

#### *Conclusions*

With passenger counts having been carried out seven times now over the last three years, it is becoming easier to understand the trends in patronage. Whilst October traffic continues to be generally higher than that in May, the overall annual level of demand has now fallen away from its 2008 peak, being about 8% lower.

Our best estimate of annual patronage is now 460,000 passengers per annum (ppa), little changed from the May figure, but a fall of over 40,000 ppa since our last wave of counts last Autumn.

Yours sincerely,



(Dr) Nigel G Harris,  
Managing Director