



# ABBEY FLYER USERS' GROUP

## Watford Junction to St Albans Abbey Line

Newsletter 57, October 2015



Unit 321417 speeds through Bricket Wood on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2015.  
This unit was due to have departed for Scotland on 20<sup>th</sup> September.  
Photo © ABFLY / Peter Alvey.

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## **Resounding support for rail at packed public meeting**

### **The public speak as one – Ditch Guided Bus!**

On 6<sup>th</sup> July, to a full house of over 65 people, ABFLY played host to a Public Meeting, at which overwhelming and at times vociferous support for maintaining the branch as a rail link was expressed.

Commencing with an update from train operator London Midland, Terry Oliver – Head of West Coast Services, explained that the line continued to be one of the most punctual routes on its network, with performance at 99.6% in the last period (trains arriving within 4 mins 59 seconds of schedule at destination) compared with 83.2% on its London Euston mainline service. This success is due largely to the Abbey Line's self-contained nature.

Several questions to Mr Oliver concerned the longstanding problem of patchy revenue collection on the branch. It was agreed that current ticket sales figures do not reflect the true usage of the line and as such, this may undermine the case for future investment.

However, following a series of revenue 'blockages', a business case had now been made for putting an extra ticket inspector on the branch between the hours of 7am and 3pm Monday to Friday. This appointment was taking time to go through LM's recruitment processes but Mr Oliver expected the position to be filled by late August / early September [*It was – of which more below. Ed*]

Mr Oliver confirmed that every train that runs on the branch has a driver and conductor. Conductors should always have mobile Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) but there had been some issues of late with unreliability of the machines.

Another issue, long highlighted by ABFLY, was that conductors do not always have time to walk through the train issuing tickets between stations because their duties require them to operate the doors. Ticket sales can generally only be done from the back cab with the current rolling stock (Class 321s). It may be the case that the overhaul of ex-Thameslink Class 319s, due to replace Class 321s in September, will include provision of door controls at every door, which should help, but this is yet to be confirmed [*In late September the 319s arrived but disappointingly they haven't had the door control modification. Ed*]

More ticket machines at station platforms are another solution but Mr Oliver was at pains to stress that „this was more complicated and expensive than you might think“ and getting a return on them was difficult especially at quieter stations e.g. Park Street and How Wood. Future franchises, „might help the situation“ but Mr Oliver would not be drawn on any specifics due to commercial sensitivity.

Note that ABFLY continue to collect data on revenue collection. Passengers are encouraged to log whether they had a ticket inspection on their journey, or not, via a simple online form on the ABFLY website: [www.abfly.org.uk/revenue](http://www.abfly.org.uk/revenue). More people doing this will enhance the quality of statistics on the matter.

Another questioner asked whether through services were a prospect. Mr Oliver explained that 'paths' through to London in the peak hours, were unlikely at present, and if they could be found, it would be difficult for 4 car trains, given capacity on the West Coast Main Line is at a premium. This poses a problem for the Abbey Line in its current state because its platforms can only accommodate 4 cars. However ABFLY noted that potential solutions may be found if Selective Door Opening (SDO) or splitting and joining of trains at Watford Junction could be adopted. These methods are used elsewhere on the network, for example at Braintree where trains from Liverpool Street come out to Witham as 12 cars, drop 8 in the loop so that only 4 go along the branch.





A gathering the like of which ABFLY has not seen for a few years!

Alternatively ABFLY noted that there is land available for platform extensions at all but one of the stations on the Abbey Line and Network Rail have in recent years built many such extensions using a modular system at relatively low cost. This will be a service improvement which ABFLY will be pressing the DfT and future franchise bidders to consider as a priority.

Mr Oliver also spoke briefly about train cleanliness and presentation. Regular feedback about the state of the trains is being fed to LM via John Lepley, of the ABFLY committee. Mr Oliver explained that security guards were now paid to pick up litter and the situation was improving. This will continue to be monitored by ABFLY.

Next to speak was Janet Tyndale, Abbey Line Community Rail Partnership Officer, who gave an update about recent CRP activities including the successful completion of the 'Abbey Gateway', further art projects and the winning of three prizes at the Community Rail Awards.

Finally to speak, about the draft Hertfordshire Rail Strategy and its consultation, was a trio from Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) consisting of Cllr Derrick Ashley (Executive Member for Environment, Planning & Transport), Trevor Mason (Safe and Sustainable Journeys Manager) and Liz Drake (Strategic Rail Officer). Cllr Ashley briefly introduced himself as taking over from Cllr Terry Douris, explaining that Cllr Douris's old role of Cabinet Member for Highways and Waste Management, which used to cover Rail, has now been split into three – Roads, Rail and Buses, with Cllr Ashley heading up the Rail team and Cllr Douris going back to his former specialism of Roads.

Cllr Ashley then handed over to Mr Mason, introduced as a Technical Expert, who explained that the new Rail Strategy was conceived as primarily an advocacy document, its principal role being to specify 'Conditional Outputs' and short, medium and long-term priorities for the rail network in Hertfordshire, against which funders such as Network Rail and the DfT were encouraged to deliver. As such it is not a detailed plan or commitment to deliver, since that is not within HCC's gift and there is no funding attached to the strategy. The philosophy is to, „influence not dictate“.

Several people pressed Cllr Ashley & Mr Mason regarding the inclusion of a Guided Bus option in what was supposed to be a Rail Strategy document. Factual inaccuracies in the document (prepared by external consultants Arup) regarding possible through-running to Euston were also pointed out by Robin White, who presented a letter from Network Rail stating that through-running over the renewed connection at Watford Junction was indeed viable 'if requested by the train operating companies', contrary to what was suggested in the consultation.

Trevor Gurd expressed the view that to even consider Guided Bus is a dangerous irrelevance – given their great expense, the well-publicised technical and legal challenges on the Cambridge to St Ives busway, and the failure of the Luton to Dunstable busway to live up to expectations. What is needed is to concentrate on improving and enhancing the existing rail service.

Robin White expressed disappointment and frustration that, after years of feasibility studies and a great deal of taxpayers money, the service on the Abbey Line is still fundamentally no better than it had been since electrification in 1988. ABFLY put in a Freedom of Information (FOI) request with HCC to uncover how much has been spent on these studies over the years, but it proved to be inconclusive, suggesting that HCC themselves don't even know how much money has been poured down the drain, let alone what value it had been.

Mr Mason conceded that, in terms of improving the service frequency, the restoration of the passing-loop at Bricket Wood "is a no-brainer". However, it was noted by David Horton that the draft Rail Strategy did not read like that – instead it seemed to dismiss the possibility of a passing loop citing previous studies which, in reality, are more than 10 years out of date. This air of 'fait accompli' was severely criticised. Mr Mason expressed regret that it had been presented in such a way, conceding after the meeting that it had been a bit of a 'PR disaster' and the wording would be revisited.

David Horton went on to explain that conditions in the rolling stock leasing market had radically changed since 2005, when a higher frequency 'heavy' rail service was last under serious consideration. It is thought, in particular, that there will soon be a glut of BR-generation EMUs on the market due to displacement by newer types. Some of these ex-BR EMUs may soon be out of work and hence leasing prices will be falling. In addition, Network Rail had designed and installed several passing loops around the UK since then, from which costs would now be better understood. Finally, it was now publically acknowledged that the line's patchy revenue collection was resulting in severe under-estimation of current passenger usage, artificially eroding the case for investment. Hence it was time to reopen the book on a higher frequency service using heavy rail, taking all these factors into account.

Kevin Ambrose summed up the feeling of the meeting by saying that, although the concept of 'Conditional Outputs' was logical and to be welcomed, many people felt disappointed that HCC were leaving the delivery side of things to rail industry 'partners', without much evidence of leadership. This was in contrast to other County Councils, such as Suffolk and Cornwall, where passing loops have been delivered and local rail services improved, or Buckinghamshire where the Buckinghamshire Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnership (BTVLEP) are known to actively be pushing for a passing loop on the Maidenhead to Marlow branch.

Mr Mason said that all opinions would be considered and encouraged everybody to have their say via the consultation (as communicated in our last Newsletter, this closed on 4<sup>th</sup> August). The final report will be published towards the end of 2015. The meeting was followed by a short AGM for ABFLY members which concluded at 2145.

## **Class 319s arrive**

### **Faltering start, but things steadily improving**

In the last newsletter we reported that the line's venerable class 321s were heading off to pastures new (Scotrail). In late September the last of them departed, and their replacement in the form of ex-GTR (Govia Thameslink Rail) class 319s have started work, though not without teething troubles.

LM has taken four 319s into its fleet to cover for the loss of seven class 321s (321411 to 321417). Whilst five 321s were diagrammed daily from the seven sets available, LM is now using three of the four 319s each day, with one unit working the branch whilst a pair of units covers the 0741 Bletchley to Euston and 1705 Euston to Milton Keynes workings. Between the peaks the units are stabled at Camden and they return to Bletchley carriage sidings at the end of the day. Maintenance is carried out by Siemens at its Kings Heath facility in Northampton. The other two diagrams that used to be worked by 321s will be covered by a pair of 350s, following work with Siemens to make an additional two sets available for service each day.

Although 319s are similar to 321s, training has still been required for all staff involved. LM has worked closely with Northern Rail, which has also taken on 319s in recent months, to understand the challenges of the units. It expects that reliability of the fleet will improve once they are working solely on AC power, with the constant switching between AC (overhead line) and DC traction (third rail) when used on Thameslink services having been a major source of technical issues.

The sets have been refreshed internally, with new seat covers fitted - a very welcome improvement for Abbey Line passengers who have had to suffer years of shoddy interiors on the careworn 321s. Unfortunately though they have not had the modification which the Northern 319s have had, to fit door controls at every door position, which could have helped to reduce ticketless travel on the Abbey Line. ABFLY will push for this modification to be a commitment as part of the forthcoming Direct Award franchise agreement.

The four sets now in use with LM are currently wearing a variety of liveries:

- 319013 – Southern Green
- 319216 – Southern Green
- 319429 – White with grey doors
- 319460 – Ex-First Capital Connect 'dynamic lines' / blue

Reaction to the new trains by Abbey Line passengers has been mixed. In the first week of operation (commencing Monday 21<sup>st</sup> September) the 319 in use appeared to be disappointingly dirty, particularly in the carpeted area between the doors – which was very heavily soiled. Other areas of flooring ranged from 'ok' to 'grubby'.

Next day (Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup>) the reliability problems kicked in when one train during the rush hour couldn't open its doors at Garston, then on Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> all branch trains were cancelled in the afternoon due to a train fault. Replacement buses were put in place, but with typical LM efficiency at one station passengers were first directed to two different bus stops, before the bus eventually arrived and loaded in a completely different location!

Week commencing Monday 28<sup>th</sup> September got off to a much better start, with the train reported as having, „Wall panels clean and bright. Floors of the solid plastic / linoleum type, even showed signs of recent cleaning...!“ And the doors seemed to open ok. However it is still being reported that the 319s seem to be running slower than the 321s, with the 0635 mainline connection to London now being regularly missed.

Although things seem to have improved from the first week, ABFLY will continue to monitor the situation and seek answers from LM about the late running and other issues.



## Cottonmill Crossing reopens after Network Rail dispute Footbridge may be ultimate solution



The scene at Cottonmill Crossing in late August – closed to all users.

The level crossing just outside St Albans Abbey station, where the footpath from Cotton Mill Lane crosses over, was monitored by Network Rail's level crossing team for nine days in August, during which nearly 250 incidents of misuse were recorded. Among the 248 incidents recorded were crossing users wearing headphones or using mobile phones, which could prevent them from hearing an approaching train, groups of youths loitering on the tracks and even one young person sitting and lying down on the crossing.

Based on the evidence a decision was made for an emergency closure while Network Rail examined their options.

Gemma Duffy, route level crossing manager, said: "The high number of incidents of misuse raised serious concerns within our safety team, prompting the emergency closure of this crossing with immediate effect. Trains travel on this section of line at speeds of up to 50mph and because of the track layout and curvature, the visibility of an approaching train by anyone using the crossing is limited. We are committed to improving safety at level crossings wherever possible and we will work with the local authority and crossing users to improve safety at this crossing as soon as possible."

The closure prompted an angry backlash from local residents, spearheaded by County Councillor for St Albans South, Sandy Walkington. On 9<sup>th</sup> September, after apparently bowing to public pressure, the crossing reopened but with a 20mph speed restriction in place for trains, rather than the usual 50mph, which unfortunately is now lengthening journey times. It is thought that Network Rail and the County Council are looking at installation of a footbridge to permanently replace the crossing, a move which ABFLY would strongly welcome.

## Notice of ABFLY Members' Meeting

Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 1915 for a 1930 start

Join us for a chance to quiz the Train Operator and the Community Rail Partnership Officer about current issues affecting the branch.

Special Guest Speaker: Jane Taylor from Ecorail Ltd, talking about her company's ambitious plans for rejuvenating branch lines and radically improving services without major cost or disruption.

Venue:

**The Parish Centre**  
**Station Road**  
**Bricket Wood**  
**AL2 3PJ**

ABFLY members get in free. We always welcome new members – join at the door or Join Online via [www.abfly.org.uk/join](http://www.abfly.org.uk/join) – subscriptions start at £5.00 per household per year.

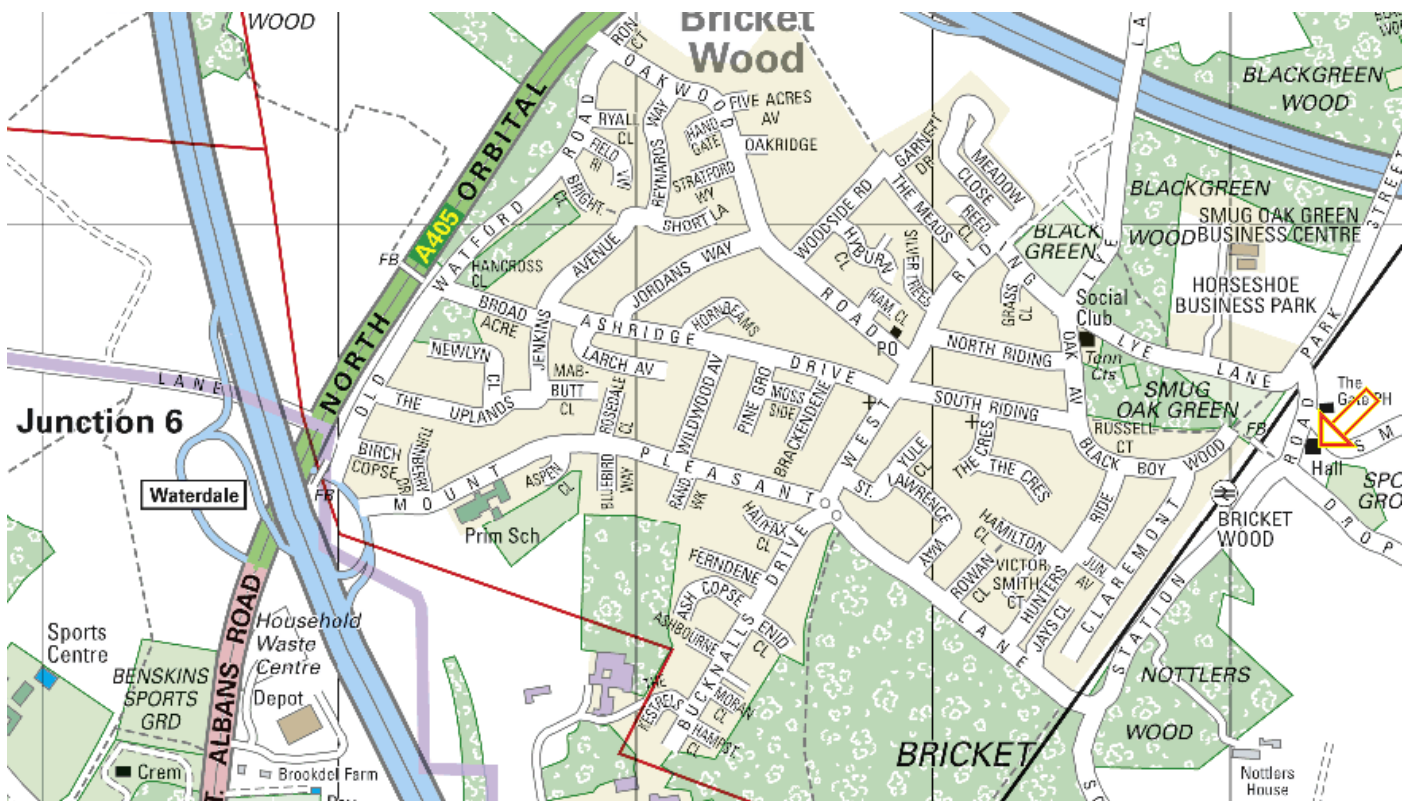
Agenda:

- 1930 – 2000: London Midland update and Q&A
- 2000 – 2015: Community Rail Partnership update (Janet Tyndale, CRP Officer)
- 2015 – 2130: **Low cost ways to make branch lines pay** – Jane Taylor, Ecorail Ltd

For further details or if you have any questions, please contact:

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Location of The Parish Centre, Bricket Wood (red arrow)

## Fare collection update

### New revenue post introduced from May, but overall collection still very poor

In response to long-running concerns about ticketless travel, London Midland have introduced a new revenue collection post between 7am and 3pm, Monday to Friday. This is a welcome step forward, but still doesn't guarantee that a revenue collector should be present and visible on every train, every day, at all hours - including Sundays, which remains in our view the only standard to beat.

Anecdotally it has also been observed that London Midland have undertaken several more revenue collection 'blitzes' in the past few months, where Platform 11 at Watford Junction has played host to two or more inspectors 'blockading' the exit.

It is too early to say whether the new post or the 'blitzes' have made a difference, but meanwhile we continue to collect data on the issue via our easy to use journey logging tool at [www.abfly.org.uk/revenue](http://www.abfly.org.uk/revenue). We would encourage anybody that uses the branch to record the details of their journey via this tool. The more data we have, the more evidence we have for presentation to the train operator, DfT, funders etc. It only takes a few minutes to do.

Three reports from the journey logging tool have now been produced and submitted to London Midland and the DfT, covering the period 5<sup>th</sup> January to 14<sup>th</sup> February, 14<sup>th</sup> February to 22<sup>nd</sup> May, and 28<sup>th</sup> May to 6<sup>th</sup> October respectively. From this it can be seen that there appears to have been a modest improvement in revenue collection, from 90% of all 'monitored' trains showing 'No Conductor seen at any point' in the first report, down to 81% in the second, and down a bit more to 78% in the third. So perhaps things are slowly heading in the right direction, but the situation is still far from satisfactory.

Score		Number of trains	Representing				
1	Conductor with mobile TVM seen but stayed in cab and made no attempt to check / issue tickets	3	3%	of the journeys that were scored	or	0.2%	of all trains runs over the period
2	Conductor with mobile TVM seen and made attempt to check and issue tickets throughout journey	3	3%			0.2%	
3	Conductor with mobile TVM seen but only made attempt to sell tickets at terminal stations	3	3%			0.2%	
4	Conductor with mobile TVM not seen at any point during the journey	82	90%			5.5%	

Revenue collection report, 05/01/2015 until 14/02/2015 (91 trains monitored):

Score		Number of trains	Representing				
1	Conductor with mobile TVM seen but stayed in cab and made no attempt to check / issue tickets	3	2%	of the journeys that were scored	or	0.1%	of all trains runs over the period
2	Conductor with mobile TVM seen and made attempt to check and issue tickets throughout journey	10	7%			0.3%	
3	Conductor with mobile TVM seen but only made attempt to sell tickets at terminal stations	14	10%			0.4%	
4	Conductor with mobile TVM not seen at any point during the journey	115	81%			2.9%	

Revenue collection report, 14/02/2015 until 22/05/2015 (142 trains monitored)

Score		Number of trains	Representing				
1	Conductor with mobile TVM seen but stayed in cab and made no attempt to check / issue tickets	6	5%	of the journeys that were scored	or	0.1%	of all trains runs over the period
2	Conductor with mobile TVM seen and made attempt to check and issue tickets throughout journey	14	12%			0.3%	
3	Conductor with mobile TVM seen but only made attempt to sell tickets at terminal stations	7	6%			0.1%	
4	Conductor with mobile TVM not seen at any point during the journey	93	78%			1.7%	

Revenue collection report, 28/05/2015 until 06/10/2015 (120 trains monitored)