



ABBEY FLYER USERS' GROUP

Watford Junction to St Albans Abbey Line

What's happening on the Abbey Line?

Update from the Abbey Flyers Users' Group (ABFLY) – January 2017

New later evening service begins

Firstly a positive story to start the New Year!

After 20 years of campaigning, progress has been made towards one of ABFLY's long held ambitions, which is to extend the running hours of the Abbey Line later into the evening.

From 11th December, London Midland have been running one additional return trip every night of the week.

So the last departure from Watford Junction is now 2221 Monday to Saturday, 2304 on a Sunday. And the last departure from St Albans Abbey is now 2242 Monday to Saturday, 2326 on a Sunday.

This has been achieved as a direct result of our lobbying – it shows that campaigning really DOES work!

This is just the beginning though. What we really want is services until midnight or beyond, to match that of London Overground and Thameslink.

As ever, however, we urge people to 'use it or lose it'. It will take some time for people to realise the service has improved – especially as London Midland have not yet put any effort into aggressively marketing the change. So please spread the word!

Residents rally once more against busway proposals Community Rail Partnership branded 'weak'

In the last issue we reported how the Abbey Flyer Users' Group (ABFLY), champions of a better rail service on the local branch line, had suspended their support for the Abbey Line Community Rail Partnership (CRP) - and called on its Chairman Cllr Derrick Ashley to resign - following renewed threats by Herts County Council (HCC) to close the line.

Cllr Ashley, who is also in charge of Transport at HCC, had put his name to the 'Transport Vision 2050' document which was released on 23rd September 2016 for consultation.

The nightmare 'Vision' included proposals to tear up the existing electric railway line between Watford and St Albans and turn it into a Bus Rapid Transit route (BRT) at a cost of some £90 million - estimated!

BRT involves running self-powered buses, probably diesel, down concrete guideways, i.e. tracks – a ludicrously expensive and wasteful idea compared to simply improving the electric, environmentally-friendly rail service we've already got.

Remember, in summer 2015, over 80% of respondents to another HCC consultation expressed their opposition to such a scheme, and their support for retaining and enhancing the Abbey Line as a rail service. It appears that these views have been roundly ignored in what ABFLY described as an "insult to the democratic process".

Since 23rd September ABFLY succeeded in rallying over 500 anti-bus responses to the HCC consultation – their best result yet! Thank you to all who took part.

Unfortunately, however, Cllr Ashley remains as Chairman of the CRP. The rest of the Partnership group decided weakly to retain the status quo. What a shame they have failed to act ethically and in the best interests of the community they purport to serve. They should be ashamed.

Thus the independence and value for money of the CRP must now be in serious doubt, an organisation that seems to have excelled at delivering art projects, 'outreach' programmes, a few shelters, signs, CCTV cameras and other such ephemera in the 11 years since it was founded, but nothing in the way of 'game-changing' improvements to the rail service which remains very much as it was in 1995.

ABFLY have now withdrawn their membership of the CRP and it will be up to ABFLY members to decide in a forthcoming democratic vote whether they wish for it to return to the table, if and when circumstances change.

The scandal of ticketless travel

The Department for Transport (DfT) will be re-letting the contract for the West Midlands rail franchise in 2017, which includes the Abbey Line.

As part of the franchise specification, a seemingly innocuous report was released under the radar entitled, "West Midlands Ticketless Travel Report".

The report contains the findings of a ticketless travel survey undertaken between 21st March and 24th April 2016 across the West Midlands franchise area.

The survey measured 'irregularity rates' and 'revenue at risk' – in simple terms 'irregularity rate' is the proportion of passengers that have an invalid

ticket or no ticket at all, and the 'revenue at risk' is the amount of money that London Midland, the Train Operator, are estimated to be losing as a result.

What it finds for the Abbey Line will come as no surprise to those of you who use the line regularly or have followed ABFLY's campaigns on the issue over the last few years:-

- The Abbey Line shows the HIGHEST irregularity rates (36.4%) across the entire West Midlands franchise area – that is, 36.4% of passengers using the branch do not carry a valid ticket (for whatever reason).
- This is significantly higher than ABFLY estimates, which had put the rate of ticketless travel at 18-20%.
- The Abbey Line leads the field in terms of irregularity rates by some 10% against the second worst-performing line which was New Street – Wolverhampton – Wellington/Shrewsbury.

BUT....

- In terms of 'Revenue at Risk', the Abbey Line is in the lowest category.

So, put simply – London Midland and their paymasters in the government don't mind you travelling for free on the Abbey Line since they lose an insignificant amount of money because of it!

I suppose this stands to reason in the world of cold, hard business – but when ticket sales data are the driver of official government line/station usage statistics, is it any wonder that the Abbey Line is always slated as 'under-used' and therefore performs badly when it comes to evaluating investment proposals such as the passing loop. "There is no business case" for rail improvements, we are always being told. Rip it up and convert it to a road then, say HCC and their road-building chums!

There is no doubt that this is the worst kind of statistical misrepresentation in order to play down the line's potential, perhaps as a precursor to closure – worthy of Dr Beeching.

And don't forget with Network Rail and the train operators being government-funded, to a greater or lesser extent, the lack of effort being put into revenue collection effectively represents a defrauding of the taxpayer – that's you and me!

Thankfully there is some hope on the horizon though.

Due to ABFLY's campaigning and sheer dogged persistence on this issue over the last few years, the government and London Midland were reluctantly forced to concede that there is a problem and they are now taking steps to rectify it – by installing ticket machines at every station. At least when they

actually work or haven't been vandalised, there is now less of an excuse for not having a ticket when passengers board the train.

But the only thing that will really help to improve matters is to have consistency of revenue collection / checking through on-train personnel or better still an Oyster-style smartcard system and barriers at stations.

Here's hoping that in the forthcoming franchise renewal, the government / bidders will come up with a significantly more robust approach to ticketless travel on the Abbey Line, now that the problem, as originally revealed by ABFLY, is now indisputable - according to the government's own figures.

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