

Marpa

Mid Anglia Rail Passengers' Association
www.marpa.org.uk

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Winter 2009 Newsletter

Welcome to the winter 2009 newsletter. This 'editorial' is maybe a bit parochial as it concentrates on two large and growing mid Suffolk villages, but I believe the issues are typical of all stations along the line.

It is now half term and the past 6 weeks have been pretty frustrating for my son who travels to school in Bury St Edmunds by train most mornings. I say most mornings because his school train, the 07:47 Harwich International to Cambridge service has become very unreliable. The reliability of a train service is critical if you use the train to travel to school – where an on time arrival is really pretty much of a necessity rather than a luxury. To give you an idea of the problem the school day starts with registration at 9.00. The train leaves Elmswell at 08.41 to arrive Bury at 08.53ish which leaves a quick dash down the road to get to registration. In theory he is 5 minutes late for school each day – not much of a problem and the school is OK with that. However 15 minutes late and it becomes a late arrival issue with the school and the student is asked to account for the lateness. No doubt at parents' evening there will be questions about whether I can do anything to get him to school on time. I could put him on the 07.23 from Elmswell, the preceding train, this arrives at Bury at 07.30 and would give him an hour plus to 'waste' – I doubt if many parents would be happy giving a child an hour or so to 'go missing' before school registration. 07.23 to 08.41 is a peak time gap of well over an hour in the 'hourly' train service – and it goes back to the botched 'One' timetable change in 2004/5. A train arriving in Cambridge at 08.46 was too late for the Cambridge schools, and the train does convey a lot of Cambridge schoolchildren so it was retimed to suit them. The needs of Bury schoolchildren were ignored – despite representations made at the time.

Needless to say the train is usually one coach and overcrowded – on occasions so overcrowded children waiting at Thurston to go to school in Bury have not been allowed to join the train – in theory a wait of one hour for the next train. My son, who has done the journey for 4 years does tell me overcrowding drops away over the term as children decide they can't stand rail travel with its unreliability and overcrowding and pester parents/elder siblings etc. into driving them in to school.

The needs of shop workers/office staff and other potential BSE commuters are also poorly served by this train. Most businesses start at 8.30 or 9 and a train from Ipswich arriving about 8.20 would be best. Pre 2004 there was an 8.06 from Elmswell to Peterborough, a train I used many times with its excellent connections on from Peterborough to the north. Now a trip from Elmswell to Peterborough requires a change at Bury or drive to Stowmarket. From the villages it is better to drive to Ely to get a train to Peterborough, or having got the car out forget the rail option altogether.

There is a solution to this and that is to stop the 8.13 departure from Stowmarket to Peterborough at Elmswell and Thurston. When I suggested this in 2004 I was told it was impossible due to promises made to the DETR. I hope that National Express will look at the options for augmenting the Bury service as they undertake their periodic timetable reviews.

2010 AGM – A date for your diary. The AGM has now been fixed for Saturday 17th April 2010 at 2.15 p.m. in the Meeting Room at the Friends Meeting House, St John's Street, Bury St Edmunds. We will be joined by two speakers; Andrew Munden, Route Director, Anglia from Network Rail and either Guy Dangerfield or Linda McCord from Passenger Focus. We are very pleased that Andrew and either Guy or Linda will be in attendance and will be talking to us about matters which link in closely with those of the Association. Please put the date in your diary now and encourage a friend to come along also?

Meeting with Passenger Focus - on 11th September, our Secretary met with Linda McCord the recently appointed assistant to Guy Dangerfield at Passenger Focus. Linda was meeting as many Rail User Groups as she could following her appointment and Ross Taylor explained the issues and aspirations of MARPA. At the time of the meeting the consultation with NXEA was still ongoing and Linda was very keen to understand our stance on this. (A separate piece on the MARPA response to NXEA is reproduced elsewhere within this Newsletter). Linda, upon her arrival by train, had already seen and noted the abundance of foliage between the running lines at Bury and the eyesore that it created. All in all it was a useful discussion at which Ross invited Linda to a future MARPA committee meeting and the AGM (see above).

The Continuing Confusion over Ticketing – This is obviously nothing new but a recent experience of our Secretary prompted him to write to NXEA about yet another inconsistent situation. Whilst waiting in the queue at Bury station at about 8.45 a.m. on a weekday Ross became aware of a young lady trying to purchase a ticket from the machine in the booking hall. It was clear that she was having some difficulties so Ross offered to help. The lady was trying to buy a day return to Ipswich. The 'most frequently used journeys' on the machine did not display a day return; it just offered a single. Ross explained that by typing in 'Ipswich' she should reveal more ticketing options. This she did and duly purchase a £9.60 Open Return.

When Ross got to the ticket office window to purchase a day return to Ipswich he was offered a Cheap Day Return at £7.90! When Ross pointed out the discrepancy with the machine to the lady at the station she, sadly, was less than helpful and said that the lady clearly did not read the instructions on the screen. She did as Ross was watching as she purchased her ticket!

We are now told that if, when using the machine, the destination 'Ipswich Buses' is requested then the cheaper ticket is offered. Why didn't the lady in the ticket office say this? Perhaps she did not know either? Ticketing is potentially a financial minefield that needs to be looked at urgently. At the time of writing Ross is still awaiting a reply from NXEA!

If you have had any experiences or heard stories like this then the Secretary would be very pleased to hear them. Please contact him on 01284 703308 or by e-mail to secretary@MARPA.org.uk One member has already been in touch and you can see the issues he has faced over the past months later in this edition.

British Transport Police Passenger Forum – MARPA is pleased to be involved with the BTP in the setting up of a passenger forum which hopes to hold its first meeting in January. MARPA is well aware of the problems of vandalism at Thurston station and we have had our own notice boards vandalised several times (most recently at Newmarket) and we want to work with BTP to help combat this menace. BTP cannot patrol the area 24/7 so we are keen to talk about initiatives that can assist. We will update members about the Forum in future Newsletter editions.

Timetable Consultation with NXEA - As was widely reported in the last (Summer) edition and already elsewhere within this, MARPA was consulted over NXEA's far reaching plans to change the timetable in December 2010 when introducing new or cascaded additional electric rolling stock onto the main line routes and in particular the Great Eastern line through Ipswich and Stowmarket. This should provide many thousand additional seats especially on the services into London.

As part of the plans it is suggested that the current Peterborough to London via Ipswich service should terminate in Ipswich so that only longer electric, rather than three car diesel, trains run into the capital. This will then enable NXEA to utilise their diesel fleet more appropriately around the rural routes. One of the benefits within our MARPA area would be for all Ipswich to Cambridge services to be formed of two car units rather than many currently being just one car. Our colleagues in Railfuture, while accepting the break of service at Ipswich, has insisted that this should only take place once the passenger lift has been installed (which is supposedly on schedule). If there is any delay to the installation of the lift then less able passengers will have to transfer between platforms escorted via the barrow crossing over the running lines as at present.

In our response we generally supported the changes although we were concerned that the Peterborough services should terminate at Ipswich and we suggested that they should continue to Colchester to give

passengers to and from North Essex more flexibility when making their travel arrangements. We also demanded that the new Colchester/Ipswich to Peterborough service should be at least hourly. This would then encourage many more passengers who wish to travel to either the Midlands or the North to consider travelling away from London and using the route via Bury.

Currently some of the connections into the Peterborough service (East Suffolk line for example) are very poor or none existent and an hourly service would dramatically change this. Previously NXEA have said that there is not a business case for an hourly service but we have responded by saying that there was not a business case for an hourly service on the Ipswich to Cambridge route but this now goes from strength to strength.

The proposed two car regime on the Ipswich to Cambridge route is a little awkward at present however as NXEA has suggested that newer Class 170 units could be used. However, our colleagues in the East Suffolk Travellers Association (ESTA) are campaigning that these units be used on their line and there are not enough units to provide both! Our argument is that these Class 170 units are capable of 100 mph and there are stretches between Ipswich and Haughley Junction, on the Ipswich to Cambridge route where the units could be used to full capacity and several vital minutes could be saved to enable a longer dwell time at Cambridge where currently the turn around time for a unit is about 6 minutes. There are no stretches on the East Suffolk line where this capability could be fully utilised.

We suspect there is more to come on this! We now await from NXEA the outcome of our, and 400 other responses to the consultation.

Bookings made at manned stations for travel from unmanned stations – On two occasions recently a member has booked a ticket in person at Bury station for travel from Thurston to Kings Cross via Cambridge. The ticket is correctly issued from the unmanned station, but if a print of the train time is requested, the print out is for departures and arrivals at Bury – so the unwitting traveller may turn up after their train has departed. Our member has also noted that connections are shown at Cambridge which may only be four minutes – rather a short time to deal with the unique configuration of Cambridge's platform – especially for the less able passenger.

The Problems of a Regular Traveller! – One of our members travels, with his bicycle, between Cambridge and Ipswich about three days per week and he copied the Secretary in to an e-mail he has recently sent to NXEA. In essence there are four main areas which prompted him to write;

- Automatic Ticket Barriers at Ipswich – There is only one 'wide' barrier (and three 'narrow') which has to cope with all passengers arriving with heavy luggage, pushchairs and bicycles. This causes many jams and leads to much frustration. The question is asked as to who designed this and what now can be done about it.
- Ticket Machines at Cambridge – Apparently the three main ticket machines will not sell a peak time ticket to Ipswich even though in the evening they will! Clearly there is a bug in the system which needs clearing. With a bicycle it is therefore very frustrating to then have to queue to purchase a ticket from the ticket window. Apparently there is one machine that will sell the peak ticket in the morning but this is regularly broken!
- Overcrowding – In the last edition we reported on the bizarre situation of the provision of just a single car unit on the weekday 17.16 service from Ipswich to Cambridge especially on race days at Newmarket. Apparently it has happened again and our member reports that on 2nd October the train was hopelessly overcrowded and as a result the train delayed. NXEA had told us that they were looking into this. Still looking perhaps?
- Breakdowns – Our member now is in the unenviable position of being on a unit (usually a Class 153!) that has broken down in Stowmarket, Bury, Newmarket and Dullingham. On 16th September it was Elmswell when the 18.16 to Cambridge expired. Before long he will have broken down at every station along the line. Can you top this?

As mentioned earlier we are keen to hear of your stories!

Calling all Parish Councils – MARPA with it's colleagues in Railfuture are willing to join parish councils in 'footfall counts' at stations along our line if they would be of benefit in campaigning for better facilities or if the service level is under threat. If your campaign would benefit please contact Ross Taylor to discuss.

Security, Assistance & Cleaning at Bury Station – MARPA understands, from some-one who is not in any way connected with NXEA, that as a result of the curtailments of overtime payments the cleaner at Bury Station now only works six nights on and six nights off. When he is not at work the ticket office staff has to clean the station and empty the litter bins. What is more surprising is that when the cleaner is not there a taxi driver locks the station up at night. It is also understood that the same taxi driver unlocks the station in a morning if the ticket office staff are for some reason unavailable.

This assistance by the taxi driver is to be applauded but what would happen if some-one got stuck in the lift or needed some other assistance and the taxi driver was on a 'fare'? It is also understood that once again the station was left locked on a Sunday morning recently, when the trains were running, when a member of the ticket office staff called in sick but then every-one had forgotten that the taxi driver was on holiday!

This is a little bit worrying especially if passengers seek access to the trains and walk across the tracks in the process. This has happened!

Progress Updates –

- Foliage between the running lines at Bury – we are pleased to say that after much pressure upon Network Rail they have now cleared all of the flourishing plants. It has to be said that it now looks so much better.
- Platform Lamp Cleaning at Bury – MARPA has been told that the platform lights are due to be cleaned in December. Again we have campaigned for this for many months; in fact it could be years! This to our knowledge will be only the second clean they will have received in the many years that they have been in situ. We hope they won't have to wait so long again for their next clean?

Contacting MARPA

If you have any ideas or issues you think we should be aware of, please contact the Hon. Secretary on 01284 703308 (between 7 and 8.30 pm if possible) or e-mail him on secretary@marpa.org.uk

MARPA Website

The website is now live at www.marpa.org.uk The website contains information on our local stations, timetable information and details of walks that start and finish at stations on the Ipswich to Cambridge line.

National Rail Timetable

The Network Rail National Rail Timetable can be found at <http://www.networkrail.co.uk/asp/3828.aspx>. The National Rail Enquiries telephone number is 08457 48 49 50

National Express website

The NX website is www.nationalexpresseastanglia.com and can be used to plan local journeys and provide journey check information.

MARPA Membership Rates

Membership rates are Adult - £4.00; Family (2 adults and up to 3 children at the same address) - £5.00. Concessions - £3.00 (Student, over 60 or UB40)

Cheques made payable to 'Mid Anglia Rail Passengers Association' and send to:-

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