

SEVENOAKS RAIL TRAVELLERS' ASSOCIATION

Autumn Newsletter

1. Meeting the New Train Operator

Since April 2006, the rail system in Kent has been operated under a new franchise by Southeastern Railway, a subsidiary of GoVia. Charles Horton, MD of the new franchisee has agreed to be the guest speaker at the Association's **Annual Meeting** on Tuesday October 10th (at 8pm in the hall of Christchurch URC on the corner of London Road and Kippington Road, just north of Sevenoaks station). We are grateful that he, like his South Eastern Trains predecessor, is prepared to come to our Annual Meeting. However, please support your Committee by being present and not leaving it to other people to come to the meeting!

When a new company takes over a rail operating franchise, most of the personnel employed by the former operator remain in their old (or similar) positions. In the case of GoVia taking over from South Eastern Trains, only four director positions changed hands.

As we have explained previously, part of your Committee works on local (station, etc.) matters, while the other part is concerned with maintaining/improving train services, etc. SRTA aims to look after Sevenoaks, Dunton Green, Bat & Ball, Otford, Kemsing, Shoreham and Eynsford stations and the rail services that serve those stations. The most important station in terms of numbers is, of course, Sevenoaks.

The Stations Group have continued meeting with the same 'rail' personnel who now work for new masters, but the change of franchisee has slowed down the decision-making process, both late in the South Eastern Trains operating period and in this early period of GoVia operations.

The Trains Group has in the past been privileged to work with at least one of the train operator's directors (and we have hopes that this may continue under GoVia). Since they took over at beginning of April, we have been invited to (and attended) at least five meetings where one or more GoVia directors were present and begun to get to know them, but have had only one face to face meeting so far. As a result, this report will contain less of the 'action' of previous years' reports. However, we have since written a major paper on our hopes for the 2009 timetable (see paragraph 3) which we look forward to discussing with GoVia in due course.

The next three paragraphs deal with subjects that should come up during the meeting.

2. December 2006 Timetable Changes

There are four areas of improvement coming up in the December 2006 timetable:

- (a) Two additional fast services will run to London between 0600 and 0700, the first departing Sevenoaks station at 0607 for Cannon Street (0641), calling at Orpington and London Bridge (the present 0612 will run non-stop to London Bridge). This service has been made possible by GoVia using some rolling stock more intensively. The second service will leave Sevenoaks at 0642, bound for Charing Cross (0711), running non-stop to Waterloo. GoVia knows that we would have liked this service to call at London Bridge, but platform 6 is fully occupied at the relevant time.

- (b) Two additional main line services will depart Charing Cross between 19.00 and 20.00 at 19.23 and 19.53. As their departure times imply, these services will run non-stop to Tonbridge, but should relieve the departures from Charing Cross between 19.15 and 20.00, which call at Sevenoaks. The 19.30 will run to Tunbridge Wells.
- (c) The half-hour gap in evening services between the departures from Charing Cross on the hour and half-hour will be filled by new services at 21.15, 22.15 and 23.15 all running to Tunbridge Wells.
- (d) Sunday services on the Hastings line will be improved to a half-hourly frequency, giving Sevenoaks a quarter-hourly fast service to and from London for most of the day.

The 7.48 at Sevenoaks, fast to Cannon Street, was changed in June to a 12-car Electrostar formation with 3+2 seating (375/9 units). This stock provides a similar number of standard class seats as the previous 10-car Networker trains, but the first class seats increased from 48 to 72. We are hoping for a similar change to the 7.29 in December 2006. We are aware that the seating in these units is uncomfortable and that the air conditioning of all 375 units is erratic - issues which we will raise with Govia.

We are pleased to see these service improvements, particularly those in (b) and (c) above. We included paragraphs about the need for these changes in the papers that we sent to the (then) potential franchisees in 2004 and 2005. More recently we also pressed for the stock changes to the two fast Cannon Street services in the mornings. Whether they are 'wins' is open to question. GoVia, like South Eastern Trains before them, look at the same train loading, etc. data as ourselves and recognise the need to improve services. On the basis of what has happened in the past, it is more likely that we are thinking on parallel lines, but we hope that our promotion of the changes has encouraged the train operator to improve the service.

3. December 2009 Timetable

Recent reports in the Sevenoaks Chronicle and e-mail that we've received from members have demonstrated concern at a possible low usage by commuters from East Kent using the fast services to St. Pancras on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL), leaving a majority of them on the 'classical' services on the main line via Sevenoaks. This is an issue that we began to consider some months ago and our work resulted in a paper we recently sent to GoVia.

The paper starts by considering an efficient pattern of off-peak service, which includes through services from Sevenoaks to both Ashford and Hastings. (In 2004-2005 the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) produced two draft off-peak timetables, the first of which lacked through services to Hastings and the second with no through services to Ashford.)

Nominally GoVia talk about introducing the second version of the SRA timetable, together with its associated peak service, on which they had to base their franchise application. However, we believe that aspects of the SRA's proposals will be inappropriate for 2009:

- The pattern of commuting has changed since 2004. With Docklands becoming more significant, commuters are travelling up earlier in the mornings and

returning home later. Govia is, of course aware of these changes, as the previous paragraph indicates.

- If Berkeley Homes' proposal to build 500 homes at Dunton Green materialises it will greatly increase the demand from that station, both during the peak and off-peak; something not forecast in 2004.
- Finally, there more technical reasons why the detail of the SRA's timetable proposals are not appropriate for the Southeastern.

Our paper sets out a basis for the historical growth in commuting since 2002 and uses the resulting factors to project growth in commuting to 2009. The major growth is at Ashford, but is also arising west of Ashford and up from Hastings. We believe, based on surveys carried at Ashford last year, that 35-40% of commuters from Ashford and beyond will wish to use the CTRL services (which will call at Stratford to access Docklands). This will leave some 60-65% of East Kent commuters on the 'classical' main line services through Sevenoaks, together with all those from stations between Ashford and Tonbridge and from Hastings up to Sevenoaks.

We have asked Govia to improve the service on the Maidstone East line, with the object of encouraging some commuters from along that line to use their local stations rather than drive to Sevenoaks and other stations on the main line up from Ashford (most stations from Headcorn inwards have commuters who live in the Maidstone/Malling area). This would reduce demand on the main line through Sevenoaks.

Finally, we have reminded GoVia that the 2009 timetable will have to include the needs of students travelling mainly to and from Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells.

GoVia's initial response welcomed the paper. They were proposing to conduct a thorough review of the 2009 timetable during this autumn for which purpose our paper was relevant and timely. We will be meeting GoVia in late September – after you should have received this report.

4. Station Matters

The Stations Group talks to local management about matters raised by the Committee or by members and supporters and sent for example to the Secretary. These are primarily concerned with station facilities, including ticket selling (machines and booking office hours), train running information, car (including disabled) parking, cycle racks, passenger security (e.g. CCTV and lighting) and station maintenance.

Following the Group's representations, improvements have been made at Sevenoaks station to the location of disabled parking places, the concourse and over-bridge flooring, the public address system and information displays. Enforcement of the car park regulations (e.g. wheel-clamping) is now undertaken on a more reasonable basis. Unfortunately, the re-programming of the ticket vending machines has not yet been put into effect (but GoVia is now working on it), nor has the regular flooding of the Kippington side car park been sorted out. We continue to pursue both subjects.

The Group is concerned that many of the stations in the SRTA area are unstaffed for long periods of the day and that this can lead to a variety of problems such as passenger safety and security, graffiti and vandalism, lack of up to date information, inability to purchase tickets and inadequate waiting and toilet facilities.

We have been arguing against further reductions in staffing levels (e.g. in the booking office at Otford) and pressed for improvements at Dunton Green, where station facilities are almost non-existent, despite recent house-building in the area. Bat & Ball is still waiting for CCTV and train information display.

GoVia have set aside some funds to improve disabled access. Sevenoaks and Otford already have lifts or ramp access to all/both platforms. A ramp could be constructed from the Community Hall car park to the up platform at Bat & Ball, but it is difficult to see reasonable wheelchair egress being provided from the down platform at Dunton Green or access to the up platforms at Shoreham and Eynsford.

5. Administration & Committee Members

One area in which we have made significant progress recently is in creating a SRТА web site (a project which we have had in mind for nearly two years). The site is still in the course of development, but can be accessed on www.srta.org.uk. We hope that you will find it useful and we look forward to getting members' reactions and ideas for new material.

The Committee is always on the look out for new members, partly to reduce its dependence on the efforts of the retired members of the Committee, but also to widen the representation of our mainly commuting membership. The Committee meets roughly every two months, which gives members a chance to contribute their ideas for improving services and to hear up-to-date reports on meetings with GoVia. We would also like to share more widely some individually small, but important, administrative jobs, including recording minutes of our meetings and encouraging membership renewal. (If you think your subscription has lapsed or would like to join for the first time, our subscription rates remain £5 for two years or £20 for 'life'. Please make cheques payable to Sevenoaks Rail Travellers' Association and send them to the Secretary at 56 Brittain's Lane, Sevenoaks Kent TN13 2JP.)

If you would like to join the Committee, the Secretary would be glad to hear from you by e-mail (benford@lineone.net) or 'phone (01732-454822). We do not expect new members to know how the train service operates! The Committee is a place to learn as well as to contribute. This is not an idle plea: it would be a great shame if the Association were to fail through lack of administrative help.

Finally, we look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at the Annual Meeting on October 10th.

Dr. R. G. Johnson (Chairman) & P. T. Benford (Secretary)