

Members' Bulletin



Issue 108
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www.eastsuffolktravel.org.uk

150 YEARS OF THE EAST SUFFOLK LINE

The East Suffolk Railway from Ipswich to Lowestoft and Gt. Yarmouth, with branches to Framlingham, Snape and Leiston, was opened in its entirety on June 1st 1859. This spring, ESTA is celebrating its 150th anniversary.

In 1965 the line was threatened with closure, and if a diverse group of local people (who went on to form ESTA) had not organized a successful campaign then to save it, we should have no anniversary to celebrate this year. In our commemoration we shall therefore pay tribute to their work as well as remembering the many changes and developments over the years and looking into the future of the line.

On Saturday May 30th we shall hold a celebratory lunch at the Bell Hotel, Saxmundham, from 12.00 to 13.45. This will cost £15 and we look forward to seeing ESTA members from up and down the line. To book, please send £15 cheque, payable to ESTA, to Peter Cannon, Travel Cannon Ltd., Station House, Station Approach, Saxmundham, 1P17 1BW. After lunch we shall proceed next door to the Market Hall, where our Public Meeting and Annual General Meeting will start at 14.15. As guest speaker we shall welcome Mr. John Bolton, a retired British Rail Engineer, who will talk on highlights of his railway career, which included the East Suffolk Line.

We shall also be pleased to welcome Mr. James Steward, recently appointed Area Manager Rural Routes for National Express East Anglia, who will speak and answer questions on present-day train services.

There will be tea and coffee at the meeting, which will conclude with our AGM. This will include reports on ESTA activity and finances and election of officers and committee for the coming 12 months.

Enclosed with this bulletin is a special anniversary leaflet with full details of our exhibitions at Woodbridge, Wickham Market, Saxmundham, Halesworth and Beccles, plus the quiz devised for the Tide Mill Walk between Woodbridge and Melton. We plan to distribute this leaflet widely. If you would like a supply, for distribution or display, please contact Trevor Garrod.

We shall also publicise the line and its anniversary at our stalls at Saxmundham Town Council Annual Charities Market on Saturday April 25th; Southwold Fete on Monday May 25th and Pakefield Fete on June 21st. Please contact our Secretary if you can help with any of these.

SOUTHWOLD MEETING ON BUS ISSUES

ESTA's Spring Meeting on March 28th in Southwold focussed on bus issues. We were pleased to welcome Mr. Richard Algar, First Bus' new Service Delivery Manager based at Lowestoft and Mr. Andrew Pursey, Director of Beccles-based Anglian Bus.

Mr. Pursey announced his company's new timetable from April 27th. It would include a new service 608 from Lowestoft to Great Yarmouth, serving the James Paget Hospital and effectively giving a through service from such places as Southwold, Kessingland and South Lowestoft to the hospital. The section from Lowestoft northwards was designated 608 to comply with EU regulations concerning service mileage.

ESTA's Chairman commented that our association had started pressing for better services to the hospital some 8 years ago and that these had gradually improved. This further innovation was most welcome. What was now needed was a better waiting facility outside the hospital.

Mr. Algar spoke about the real time information system now installed at Lowestoft Bus Station and at several other bus stops around the town. Passengers could now see on a screen when the next bus was due. On low-floor buses such as an routes 101/2 and 99B a satellite link also enabled the screen to show if the bus was delayed. This system would gradually be extended to other routes.

Asked about some elderly buses, Mr. Algar said that First Bus were gradually phasing out old double-deckers on the X2 route and that they should all be replaced by more modern buses in the summer. He took note of a member's complaint that the 15.58 from Norwich terminated at Beccles and this issue could be looked at as part of an overall review of Lowestoft area services due to be held before the end of the year.

40 low-floor double-deckers would be coming to East Anglia during 2009; and the resulting cascade process should benefit users of services from both Lowestoft and Ipswich depots. Several members were critical of the information and advice on bus services now being provided by the Traveline phone number. We were advised by both speakers that they were also aware of the problems, which arose partly because the helpline was now run from outside Suffolk and agents had less local knowledge. This is an issue which ESTA may be able to pursue further via its national contacts.

Asked about bus stop locations and facilities, Mr. Pursey and Mr. Algar both said that operators were not responsible for these and there was sometimes a lack of communication from the County Council, which was responsible for them.

There was also discussion of possible re-routing of buses in Southwold, because of difficulties in turning vehicles in the Market Place. The option of running via Victoria Street and down to the Pier had been considered but rejected. Running to the Harbour as done by Anglian Bus certainly satisfied a certain market, at least in the summer months.

A range of other questions were asked about specific services run by each operators, and our speakers promised to consider these.

The issue of car parking at Darsham station was also raised, as a considerable number of Southwold and Reydon people park and ride there. A plea was made for better notices, at eye level, for drivers at the car park entrance, including a sign that the station car park is for rail users only.

BOUNDARY COMMISSION:

ESTA opposed proposals by the Commission to move Lowestoft into Norfolk as we did not consider that this move would be to the overall benefit of public transport users. We are therefore pleased that the Commission has dropped the idea, and we await with interest its final proposals for Suffolk.

LOWESTOFT STATION MOVING?

Correspondence in the Lowestoft Journal during March and early April showed an overwhelming majority in favour of keeping the railway station where it is.

In our campaign to stop 1st East from moving the station, we were also encouraged by the Department for Transport's announcement in February that it had dropped its "Minor Modifications" proposals. These would have allowed a station such as Lowestoft to be closed and rebuilt 400 metres up the line without the need for a proper public consultation. ESTA and Railfuture (the national body to which we are affiliated) both made submissions to the Department for Transport opposing its proposals.

National Express East Anglia have now agreed that ESTA members can carry out on-train surveys of East Suffolk Line passengers in a bid to see how many would be inconvenienced if the regeneration company 1st East succeeded in having the station moved from its present central site.

We therefore propose to do the surveys in the weeks commencing Sunday August 9th and Sunday September 20th. This will enable us to sample a peak holiday week and a week when most people will be back at work, school or college.

Several members have already said that they would be willing to help with the surveys. Could you please let Rod Lock know on which day(s) in either or both weeks you would be available? Further volunteers will also be very welcome.

"TRY THE TRAIN...TRY THE BUS..."

Last October, ESTA produced a Halesworth version of our leaflet of this title, and it was distributed throughout the town.

Peter Cannon and Helen Armstrong are now working on a version for Saxmundham, Leiston and Aldeburgh, which it is planned to issue in mid May. The front of the leaflet will contain general information about train and bus services and facilities while the back will summarise local services.

If you could help with the distribution of this leaflet, please let Trevor Garrod know.

WOODBIDGE OPEN-TOP BUS AGAIN

The open-top bus will again run on Thursdays and Saturdays from mid July till the end of August serving Woodbridge and Melton stations and the Turban Bus Station, linking various places of interest in the town and the unique National Trust site at Sutton Hoo.

ESTA has sponsored the service to the tune of £50 and so our logo will be included in the publicity for it. We are advised that the timetable will be the same as in 2008. We hope to enclose a leaflet with our July Members' Bulletin and shall also be pleased to hear from any members willing to take a bulk supply.

In its first season, in 2007, the bus carried 627 passengers. In 2008 this number increased to 670, despite mixed weather. Let us endeavour to push it up much more in 2009.

EAST/WEST RAIL LINK

ESTA has for some years supported the campaign for an East/West Rail Link from Cambridge to Oxford via Bedford, Bletchley and Bicester. It would provide an important route from East Anglia to the Midlands and further afield, and would attract traffic off the roads.

Our Secretary has written to Lord Adonis, Minister for Railways, urging him to speed up work to identify the best route from Cambridge to Bedford.

The route currently favoured by the East-West Consortium would run south of Bedford and via Hertford and Harlow. There are, however, other possibilities.

NXEA FORUM:

Our Treasurer Alan Williams is due to attend a forum for passengers' associations organised by National Express East Anglia in London on April 28th.

EXTRA CARRIAGES FOR NATIONAL EXPRESS EAST ANGLIA

On April 4th, ESTA's Chairman and Secretary received a circular from NXEA's Managing Director saying that they would be receiving 188 additional carriages over the next three years. This would include 120 new carriages and 68 transferred from elsewhere. The main beneficiaries will be travellers into Liverpool Street during the peaks but there will also be some extra capacity provided on Norwich - London trains. That in itself is obviously good news.

What the circular did not say, however, was how this might affect East Suffolk Line travellers. However, we have also seen a press release dated 2-4-09 which contains a footnote "NXEA wishes to implement a scheme involving changes to the services on the East Suffolk line from Lowestoft and Peterborough to Ipswich line. These changes would require alterations to the Service Level Commitment (SLC) upon which NXEA will undertake consultation with all Relevant Stakeholders."

Does this mean that our through London trains will be withdrawn or reduced? ESTA's Chairman has written to NXEA's Managing Director seeking clarification.

NETWORK RAIL INVESTMENT:

On March 31st a £35 million investment plan was announced, and Network Rail's press office indicated it would include Beccles Loop. We await more details, but our Secretary, when contacted by the Eastern Daily Press, welcomed the news.

RAIL CAN GIVE GOOD VALUE:

Our member Nesta Wilson reports "I recently purchased an Advance Return ticket from Halesworth to Bedwyn (Wilts), using my Railcard, and the total cost, including Underground was £25.70. I think that's great value"

BUT WE NEED A MORE JOINED-UP SYSTEM

On January 29th our member John Benford travelled from Birmingham to London and should have had enough time to catch the 11.38 from Liverpool Street to Lowestoft. However, the train into London was 25 minutes late and he just missed it.

He was allowed to board the 12.00 to Ipswich, even though his Advance ticket was only valid for the 11.38. However, he was told by two members of NXEA staff that he should provide proof that his train from Birmingham had been late - for example by getting it suitably stamped at Euston.

Mr. Benford sent a complaint to NXEA's Customer Relations department, who finally replied on March 7th, apologising but stating "We as a company have no way of knowing delays affecting passengers (sic) services; in this case the onus would be on the passenger to provide proof of delay (normally a stamp or note written on the ticket itself)"

DIAL-A-RIDE FROM BAWDSEY?

A number of ESTA members and other passengers have expressed concern about proposed changes to the service 71 and 72 buses between Woodbridge and Bawdsey and Orford.

We have been in contact with Mr. Derek Cocker, Suffolk County Council's Demand Responsive Transport Manager who says that it is planned to change timings on service 71 to improve rail connections; while service 72 will be replaced in July by an "anywhere to anywhere" service within the Wilford Peninsula Monday to Saturday between 07.00 and 19.00.

When the issue was discussed by the ESTA committee, it was considered that commuters really need a scheduled service, but that in certain circumstances there may be a case for DRT (Demand Responsive Transport) off-peak.

Our discussions with Mr. Cocker are continuing and we hope to report further on our website www.eastsuffolktravel.org.uk.

ESTA TRAIN AND BUS SURVEY

The report of our recent survey of local train and bus journeys, based on members' questionnaires completed in November, was sent to operators, decision makers and other stakeholders in January. 135 local train and bus trips were surveyed.

There was praise for the on-train staff (described as helpful and professional in 80% of cases) and bus drivers (also described as helpful in 79% of cases.)

There were also favourable comments on the through Lowestoft - London trains and for the more modern buses introduced by the main operators, First Eastern Counties (FirstBus) and Anglian Bus.

Train punctuality showed some slippage, however, with 58% arriving late (most commonly by an average of 2 minutes). Buses operated by FirstBus also arrived late in 61% of cases though only 12% of Anglian Bus trips were late.

In 33% of cases members walked to the rail station to start their journey, while 31% arrived by car. This reinforces ESTA's long-standing campaigns for better parking facilities, especially at Wickham Market, Darsham and Melton stations.

Interestingly, only 2% of travellers arrived at the station by bus - but only Halesworth offers a reasonable bus/train interchange facility.

63% of those reporting on train journeys said they would have used an on-board catering facility if one had been available. Some suggested provision of a trolley service for at least part of the journey on the Lowestoft - London trains.

The most frequent suggestion for rail improvements, however, was for an hourly service between Ipswich and Lowestoft. In our report we therefore stressed the need for more progress with funding for a passing loop at Beccles to help make such a service possible.

A new question in this year's survey asked passengers how they found out about train and bus times. 76% said they used a printed train timetable and 10% used a website. Similarly on the buses 84% used a printed timetable but 15% used a website.

Other possible areas for improvement mentioned by respondents included the seat reservation system on the Lowestoft - London trains and the lack of, or inadequacy, of bus shelters at Tesco Superstore, Gunton; Lowestoft rail station and the Turban Centre at Woodbridge.

ESTA 100 CLUB

This quarterly draw generates useful income for our association and help us campaign while keeping subscriptions at a modest level. The first draw of 2009 took place at our Southwold meeting on Saturday March 28th, when the winners were: Mrs. Marion Schlee of Woodbridge; Mr. Alan Williams of Thurlton; Mr. R. F. Brown of Lowestoft and Ms. E. Hostettler of Saxmundham.

The next draw will take place on May 30th. To join it, please send £12 for one year, or £6 for half a year, to our Treasurer.

BOOKING A TICKET

ESTA's Chairman had a letter published in the Eastern Daily Press on 26.3.09 commenting on a previous correspondent's difficulties when booking a Norwich - London train ticket by phone. These transactions are now handled by a distant call centre in Newcastle. We had protested against the closure of the Norwich call centre. It gives us no pleasure to be proven right, and National Express needs to ensure that it has sufficient staff with sufficient time to deal with the public - if fewer staff are put under greater pressure, mistakes are liable to happen.

BUSES TO GUNTON TESCO

Our Secretary has been in further correspondence with Tesco management (who at one stage referred his letters to their Customer Service Centre in Dundee!) and Mr. Bob Blizzard MP has also been actively pursuing the issue.

We have been told that planning permission is now being sought for a layby for three buses and a shelter on Leisure Way, the approach road to the store.

BECCELES MUSEUM

in Ballygate, is now open for its summer season and from May to August will have a display of items to celebrate the town's rail connections to London, Lowestoft and Yarmouth. On Tuesdays and Thursdays in May and September there will also be a Victorian clothes show - showing what the first East Suffolk Line passengers would have worn. On June 6th / 7th there will also be a Beccles Railwaymen's Weekend.

The museum is open from 2.15pm to 5.00pm daily till November 1st, except on Mondays; but it also opens on Bank Holidays. For details please phone 01502 715722 or log on www.becclesmuseum.org.uk

HALESWORTH LIBRARY TALK

On Wednesday 17th June at 10.30am in the Gallery our Secretary, Rod Lock, will be giving an informal talk on local railway history as part of the Over-55s programme.

ESTA AUTUMN MEETING

will be on Saturday October 24th in St Marks Church Centre, next to Oulton Broad South station.

We also hope to have stalls at the East Anglian Transport Museum Trolleybus Weekend and Ipswich Transport Museum; and will consider holding stalls at other indoor and outdoor events - especially as we have also now purchased a display stand! If you have any suggestions, and/or can help, please contact our Secretary.

ESTA is pleased to work with GRYFF COMPUTING of Saxmundham who design this bulletin and send it out electronically. They also offer a full range of IT services. Contact David Adams on 01728-603311 or visit www.gryff.co.uk

We are also pleased to work with BLYTHWEB Ltd of Wenhaston, who maintain our website and offer a wide range of IT services. Phone Tim or Eileen Heaps on 01502-478712 or log on to www.blythweb.net

TRAVEL CANNON LTD, Station House, Station Approach, Saxmundham, on 01728-604600 offer a full range of foreign travel facilities and are open Mon-Fri plus Sat mornings.

On Lowestoft station, SHOPMOBILITY sell hot and cold drinks, sweets, newspapers, magazines and many other useful things as well as offering a photocopying service and hiring out electric wheelchairs. They are open mornings Mon-Sat and till 15.00 Tue-Thurs and 16.00 Fri-Sat.

MATERIAL FOR NEXT BULLETIN should reach Trevor Garrod by July 12th and can be emailed to chairman@eastsoffolktavel.org.uk