



**Newsletter 137
Autumn 2007**

FIRST GREAT WESTERN

Sunday December 9th 2007 will see commencement of the long awaited December 2007 timetable. Draft information has been made available in advance as part of FGW's communications plan to advise travellers well in advance as to how revised schedules are likely to affect them. At present only weekday proposals may be reviewed on www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk (see under Train Times). At last we have a number of improvements – especially to 'fast' morning peak services to Paddington and more evenly spaced off-peak services. But, as usual, whilst not everything will satisfy everybody we expect a lot more satisfied customers this time around. There are still some issues which concern us, and we will be continuing to chase FGW to see how these may be resolved. We plan to send copies of timetables to our members in the usual way in early December.

Our local rail services are important means of communication for many people. MMPA tries to help you by looking for ways to improve services / connections. MMPA committee asked for a review of early morning trains to try to break the 90 minute gap in services from Maidenhead towards Bourne End and Marlow – FGW response was to retime the 0857 from Marlow to 0837 departure and run 20 mins earlier - thus allowing space to run the 0903 from Maidenhead to Bourne End and 0918 return. We have made a review of the services now in place and on balance we are in favour of the status quo. Our friends in Marlow are not so pleased that they still have a 90 minute gap in their services. However they are allowed to purchase Cheap Day tickets on 0837 train, but must wait in Maidenhead for 20 minutes and catch the 0923 departure for Paddington (thereby complying with weekday morning off-peak travel regulations of not arriving into London before 1000).

Many of you will have noted in the May timetables a number of errors and discrepancies that had crept into the various booklets and leaflets. Naturally FGW were apologetic and have promised to get things right next time (re-issue of information in September 2007), and we will continue to pursue this – after all timetables represent the face of the company to many people.

MAIDENHEAD STATION

You may recall that one of the franchise commitments by FGW was to improve Maidenhead station. Plans are in hand for reinstating platform 1 at Maidenhead, a platform that was truncated many years ago. We understand that FGW do not plan scheduled services to stop at platform 1, but it will allow HST and 6-car 'Turbo' formations to stop either in emergency or when there is scheduled engineering work on the other tracks. The platform will also be DDA compliant – but we have not seen how this will be achieved. Other work scheduled for the station is improvement to the entrance and public circulating areas. No dates have been circulated regarding completion of these works.

CHILTERN RAILWAYS

Chiltern continues to make amendments to timetables. Some changes to peak-time stopping patterns from High Wycombe and Beaconsfield have been made which are anticipated to improve use of both available capacity and stopping patterns at a few stations.

Users of Chiltern services will be pleased to know that the latest plans to re-develop the station are due to be placed before WDC in the next few weeks, and that the outcome should be known late in the autumn.

News that Chiltern Railways parent company had been taken over by an investment company has subsequently been accompanied by news that the railway operations are to be sold off. We are told that the existing rail franchise will not be affected, nor will future plans for additional activity in North London and Shropshire. We await the outcome.

CONTACTS WITH MMPA

**MMPA WEBSITE – www.mmpa.org.uk
SECRETARY – 15 Calder Close, Maidenhead, SL6 7RS**

Subscription rates – Adult £4 – Family £5 – Concessions £3
Should you wish to know more about MMPA or to join the Association, please contact us either –
Secretary (15 Calder Close, Maidenhead, SL6 7RS),
or through the website (www.mmpa.org.uk)

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

Our Secretary Allan Machon wishes to place on record the grateful thanks of the committee to all those who have supported us over the last year. Where has the time gone? I am pleased to say that most members have renewed for this year, and those who haven't will find a final reminder with their newsletter.

We have recruited 8 members in 2007, so a special welcome to them. We have continued our regular discussions with FGW over the course of the year and we would like to feel we have had some input to the revised timetable to be introduced on 9th December. It will be very interesting to see what effect the new MD will have and trust we will see an improvement on timekeeping, cleanliness and all the other points we are continually raising.

FIRST GREAT WESTERN CUSTOMER PANEL

The First Great Western Customer Panel receives regular correspondence which is dealt with via FGW Customer Relations Department in Plymouth, with relevant responses being referred to panel members. Clerical activity is coordinated through FGW Customer Relations office.

Contact - email : customer.panel@firstgroup.com
- postal : Customer Panel, c/o Customer Relations, FGW, Freeport SWB 40576, Plymouth PL4 6ZZ

The Customer Panel acts as an interface between FGW and customers. Panel members are volunteers and act in honorary capacity.. Do you have an interest in rail travel – not necessarily as a daily user? Panel co-ordinators are looking to strengthen local input into the Panel. If you would like to know more about the Customer Panel please contact Customer Services at Milford House, 1 Milford Street, Swindon SN1 1HL (lesley.colman@firstgroup.com).

TRAVEL INFORMATION

BBC RADIO BERKSHIRE - 104.1, 104.4 and 95.4 fm. (also 01189 – 311333 or www.bbc.co.uk/berkshire)

National Rail enquiries: 08457 - 484950 (24 hrs)
Great Western Telesales : 08457 - 300700 (Mon - Sat) (www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk)
Chiltern Railways : 08456 - 005165 (0700 - 2000) (www.chilternrailways.co.uk)
Arriva Bus : 01494 - 520941 (0900 – 1730 Mon – Fri)
Traveline : 0870 – 6082608 (0700 – 2100 daily)

IS MY TRAIN ON TIME?

Following representations from MMPA, posters have been placed at all local stations advising customers of telephone contacts available for travellers to check availability of trains. This is in addition to the 'Help' points at both Marlow and Bourne End stations.

Using a mobile phone. TRAINTRACKER TEXT – Text 484950 with your train requirements. Example given is 'dep Bath to London 1700'. The response will tell you the next 3 trains from Bath to London after 1700hrs and their status (cancelled, running late or on time).

TRAINTRACKER – Call 0871-200-4950 and follow the easy to use instructions and the automated voice will answer your query.

If you use any of these services we would like to hear from you concerning your experience – help, speed of response, usefulness of information, etc.

TICKETS

One issue that often crops up in our meetings with FGW is the subject of ticketing. Some of you will be aware of recent experiences of some passengers from Cookham; we suspect that these were typical of other people's encounters with some members of FGW staff. We had similar disagreeable practices at gate-barriers reported to us some months ago

and had been assured (as had the FGW Customer Panel) that things would improve. It appears that standards have slipped again and commonsense is not always being applied to given sets of circumstances. There is also an issue of communicating information between different factions of FGW staff – we have asked for this to be improved.

OTHER ACTIVITY

From November 14th Eurostar will cease to use Waterloo at the London terminus of services; from this date St Pancras will commence to be the interchange in London. This coincides with the opening of the final section of the high-speed link across southern England to the Channel Tunnel. Services to both Paris and Brussels will also be speeded up, and a few extra services provided. However, we read in railway press that some interconnections with other European trains may not be as good as we might expect – a group of operators' representatives has been formed to address this but it will probably take a couple of years to sort timetables to a more satisfactory level. Note – according to railway press, if you are planning to travel on Eurostar on either 13th or 14th November there will be a number of changes to services with fewer services running on these days; this is to ensure all transfers of staff and trains is effected smoothly.

Some UK rail franchises will also be revised in November – Cross-country services will be run by Arriva, not Virgin as happens now. Franchises in the Midlands will also be revised, with National Express ceasing to operate these services, although they have gained the East-coast main-line franchise. All these changes see scope for greater fares rises above inflation as the government seeks ways to recover some of its outlay on the rail network.

The government has recently announced expansion of the free pensioners' local bus pass in England from next April. Local bus passes will be valid across the country, not just for services within your locality, for the over-60's and eligible disabled people. The pass will only be valid on local bus services, not on express / inter-city bus routes, between 0930 and 2300hrs on weekdays, as well as all day at weekends and on bank holidays.

As these notes are being formulated it would seem that Crossrail funding is likely to be finally agreed, an important part of getting the project through the statutory activity. Your committee look forward to electrification of the line, but do not agree with termination at Maidenhead. Reading is far more logical place for the service to inter-relate to the rest of the network. There are serious implications for timetabling of trains, notably towards Reading from Maidenhead, and also the fact that draft plans indicate that branch-line passengers will need an interchange time of nearer 10 minutes that the current 4 / 5 minutes.

RAILTOURS FROM MAIDENHEAD

We have been advised of 2 railtours due to call at Maidenhead:

- Sat Oct 27th – steam-hauled excursion to Salisbury ('The Great Western Envoy')
- Sat Dec 29th – diesel / steam-hauled to Welsh Marches and Lickey Incline ('Elgar 150 Explorer')..

Provisional pick-up time @ Maidenhead is 0840hrs for both trains.

Further details – Kingfishers Railtours (www.kingfisherrailtours.co.uk or 0870-747-2983 / 0870-814-7734)

BUS SERVICES CHANGE ROUTE NUMBERS

From 3rd September some bus routes were renumbered . The High Wycombe – Bourne End – Maidenhead route is now route 37 (formerly 317) and the High Wycombe – Marlow – Reading routes are now numbered 800 and 850 (previously 328 and 329).Frequencies of services from Bourne End, Henley and Marlow to High Wycombe have also been increased.

FOOTNOTE

At a recent Passenger Focus conference FGW pointed out that one of their objectives was 'To get our customers to where they want to go, safely, reliably, promptly and in comfort'. We hope these objectives are soon achieved on a consistent basis

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Meeting held at Bourne End Community Centre 23rd March 2007

MMPA Committee: Nigel Hunt [Chairman] **NH** Allan Machon [Secretary] **AM**,
Mark Jameson [Treasurer] **MJ** Richard Porter **RP** [Webmaster] Georgina Kilner **GK** [committee]
Ken Fulker **KF** [committee] Stewart Howard **SH** [committee]

Guests: (from First Great Western) Richard Rowland **RR**, Lesley Colman **LC**, Pat Reade **PR** and Simon Stallard **SS**

Apologies from Maurice Oram [President] **MO**

Chairman - NH having welcomed everyone to the meeting, reviewed the agenda and gave a brief overview of the last year.

The press contains mostly negative news – the recent accident in the Lake District, fares structure on Southwest Trains, and local timetabling and rolling-stock issues.

- From MMPA perspective many issues concern communications and timetables. We have frequent contact with Theresa May (MP for Windsor and Maidenhead) concerning rail-related issues, especially timetabling. However good, bad or indifferent are our timetables it takes some pain out of commuting when all scheduled trains run and on time – we lack consistency of performance. The perception is that FGW has improved timekeeping lately but still a long way to go. Chiltern has also revised schedules – which has not been totally successful, but they are more able to react to the situation. NH has represented MMPA at the FGW Customer Panel and Chiltern Railway Passenger Board (for High Wycombe station).

- Communications is important, not only for customers but also for staff who need to help customers. CIS on stations is due for renewal, but not for some 3 years, when the whole FGW network of CIS will be renewed. We hope the CIS between Maidenhead and Marlow can be made to work properly, which it is failing to do at the moment.

- Interior cleanliness of trains has been criticised, and we welcome the early evening cleaning duty on branch trains, but effort is needed on other services serving Maidenhead. Local stations suffer vandalism and anti-social behaviour – periodic attempts to solve this have met with varying degrees of success. It is an on-going problem. Users of local stations enjoy good service from staff, although there are times (mainly sickness and holidays) when service is not as good as it ought to be, and we have concerns at the number of times buses have been used to cover shortage of train crews - we are promised improvements.

- Project to improve Maidenhead station is being discussed, and we look forward to the outcome. High Wycombe station is subject to a major redevelopment, with plans due to be considered by Wycombe District Council.

- We must remember Chris Wallis, avid supporter of both MMPA and re-introduction of services between Bourne End and High Wycombe. His words of wisdom will be missed. Latest plans see part of that route being converted into a cycle-path.

- Finally, the committee - we must look for succession as several members of the current team either do not expect to be in, or make themselves available for, office in a 2-3 year's time. There is also maintenance (and improvement) of the newsletter to consider. We hope that some members will come forward to join the committee. In conclusion I must thank colleagues for actions in the past year – all of us somehow find time to keep MMPA going.

Treasurer - MJ advised another steady year. Secretary receives a cheque on account prior to, and presents a receipt after, each mailing. NH added we had received and spent money to support the photographic display in Maidenhead station; we also received a donation from a member to support promotion of the line – this we will add to when we are happy with timetable arrangements and in discussion with FGW.

Membership – AM thanked all for supporting MMPA and paying promptly, and especially those who gave additional donations. He will accept subscription renewals at the end of this meeting.

Election of officers – Apart from the current Committee no additional nominations had been received either by post or from the floor. It was agreed to re-elect the existing committee en-bloc (details at the head of these notes). It was noted that the advice of the meeting omitted Richard Porter (webmaster) – this was accepted as an error.

Any Other business – NH asked if there was anyone willing to take over management of the newsletter, but no offers.

AM thanked Celia and Alan for their help with distributing newsletters, in addition to SH and KF – it also helps to keep costs down as over 50% of newsletters are delivered by hand.

With formal AGM business closed (2020hrs), the meeting was handed to First Great Western.

1 - Review by Richard Roland

- RR admitted that FGW had got things wrong in the new franchise, especially timetables and rolling-stock, notably in the Thames Valley, and are looking to improve the situation. Nothing significant can be expected until December 2007 timetables, when the unreliable 'Adelante' fleet will be handed back to the leasing company and FGW will have sufficient 'Turbo' and (refurbished) HST sets to provide additional services and extra capacity.

- Cleaning regimes are being re-contracted, with more stringent terms, as well as revised audit procedures - this applies to both stations and trains.

- Performance is still not good, although recent trends have seen improved punctuality. Failures of infrastructure continue to be major cause of problems; upgrading relief lines to 90mph progresses (over 80% of the Rdg-Padd relief line can be upgraded). National Rail investing heavily in the route but a backlog means it take a number of years to resolve. Internally, FGW management has been restructured as part of a recovery plan which has included hiring a spare HST set to cover the refurbishment period.

- Maidenhead station – to be refurbished with work starting later this year on reinstating Platform 1, followed by greatly improved circulation area around the entrance and booking-office (also changes to access via Shoppenhangers Rd entrance). New ticket vending machines have been installed at Maidenhead and Bourne End.

- Customer Information System – ongoing work to try to keep current system working, but it is very unreliable. The section along the branch-line will remain inconsistent and it will be 18-24 mths at least before replacement system in place.

2 - Lesley Colman

LC liaises with stakeholders (such as MPA) as well as individual customers. The FGW Customer Panel was set up in 2005 with volunteer members representing various age groups and travel requirements. The Panel tends to deal with longer term issues rather than individual complaints, although some issues being common to the FGW network are discussed. Meetings are lively and may contain information not in public domain – hence a need to sign confidentiality agreements. Sub-committees handle some of the more detailed discussions. Mark Powell recently joined the Panel to cover Maidenhead and the branch – MPA will of course continue to be involved. There are posters at stations indicating how to make contact with Panel representatives.

Presentations were followed by the question and answer session.

The ticket-office area at Maidenhead was criticised – the area at the entrance to the station is to be remodelled as part of the refurbishment (due to start in the Autumn), allowing a better queuing and circulation area.

For clarification the section of relief line to be upgraded to 90mph is between Paddington to Reading.

Cleaning of trains and stations – RR explained that FGW chose contract cleaning as it could employ specialist companies (rather than directly employed staff).

Plenty of discussion about train failures, cancellations, etc and communication of these facts to customers at branch-line stations. Marlow and Bourne End have help points. All stations except Marlow have rostered morning staff in ticket-offices but information does not always reach these offices. (In times of holiday and sickness the offices are often unmanned, exacerbating the communications problem). RR stated that with faults on trains the first priority is to try to get the train moving again, a process which may take time. However, there was recognition that information is not as readily available as it ought to be. For instance the local tannoy system is prone to failure and will not be replaced until the FGW network is renewed, and there is no local interface from Maidenhead. GK suggested that FGW ought to consider a freephone number for information on branch-line running, especially when ticket-offices are closed; RR agreed to investigate. It was clear that the procedures surrounding communications to, and contingency plans for, branch-line customers needed to be clarified.

The theme of communications was continued with discussion based on experiences when services were disrupted due to storm damage. There was little or no information at Paddington to help travellers – some trains running Slough – Reading only, but no help about other stations and services. At Maidenhead no staff on hand to give help or guidance - a train stopped on P1 at Maidenhead for Reading – the message (if any) had not got through to the hoards of people waiting on P3 who missed this service. NH added that during the recent HST engine fire at Burnham information was being tannoyed at Slough but not frequently enough – apparently little or nothing was being announced at Paddington. RR recognised that although some progress has been made, including centralising customer information, there was much the company needs to do to address its communications – there is a time-lapse between where we are now and installation of new customer information systems.

RR advised that a new ticketing system had recently been introduced at all stations – the system also allows for e-mails to be sent staff via that system – NH asked that staff are aware / trained as he was sure that was not the current position.

There were several comments regarding quality of train timetable information from data-bases, which sometimes produces conflicting output – no clear explanation, but late input of engineering data is one possible cause.

With regard to attendance of engineers to break-downs in the field there is no specific response time – each problem is on its merits. The policy is always to try to get trains moving and if needs be get it Reading depot as soon as possible.

In response to question of the frequency of bridge-bashes, and engineers' response time, RR advised that this is mainly down to Network Rail rather than FGW – an engineer is alerted as soon as there is a report of an incident; there are contingency plans for trains to run at very low speed in some situations (eg, where there are 4 tracks and 2 adjoining bridges) for the driver to do a visual inspection from adjacent tracks. Drivers of road vehicles are prosecuted when caught – often the vehicles are stuck under the bridge so locating the perpetrator is easy. When the incident is reported and no vehicle is found there is not a lot that can be done regarding prosecutions. In the Irish Republic 'bridge-bashing' is a criminal offence.

The staffing of branch-line trains engendered discussion, especially the numbers of occasions over the last few weeks for trains to either be cancelled through lack of crew, or not through to Marlow due to lack of a conductor. Due to local operating rules a conductor has to be on the Bourne End to Marlow train and operates the Bourne End ground-frame; where this was not possible substitute buses would run instead (as has happened this evening). RR advised that there is a plan to motorise these points so a change in operating needs is likely to arise; no date was specified for the work to be completed. It was suggested that recognised bus-stops were setup for bus replacement services to use – at present the bus-driver stops where he thinks best. NH advised that not so long ago he helped create a map and plan of the route for bus-drivers as it is very rarely that any member of FGW staff travels on the bus, let alone is familiar with the route. PR to see if map still exists.

Question of timing of trains to reach London for 1000 (earliest arrival time for cheap day tickets from the area). Train times had altered from the branch connection. 0923 train from Maidenhead was the train which arrived in Paddington at 1000. RR would check derogations for earlier travel from the branch to connect with this train at Maidenhead.

Obtaining tickets by means of internet - although bookings for a variety of travel allows local printing / verification of tickets, the majority of software currently installed in the railway industry's fares-machines does not allow printing of internet-booked tickets. LC advised that there is a validation process across the industry which needs to be resolved before collection of pre-booked tickets can be achieved.

The ever-burning question of local trains using platforms 13 / 14 at Paddington was raised. RR stated that Network Rail has to maximise the usage of its platforms and that there will invariably be times when local services (less carriages) have to use these shorter platforms. This procedure also reduces delays caused by local trains crossing tracks to gain their allotted route. Further angst results from the frequent announcing of platform allocations less than 5-8 minutes before departure.

A question was raised about noise levels in 'Turbo' units from underfloor engines. Technology changes and newer trains (whether

electric or diesel powered) will produce less noise. RR advised that there are no plans to change underfloor insulation in the diesel fleets.

There was discussion regarding the times at which validity of railcards started – normally this was when cheap day return tickets became available (which varies from station to station). RR agreed to check local arrangements, which would include action to ensure ticket-barriers worked in conjunction with ticketing times.

Waiting for connections, especially to Reading (at peak-time travel) from Maidenhead was a timetabling issue which RR agreed was a frustration to many people and which FGW is looking at to try to resolve in the Dec 07 timetabling. A number of travellers going west off branch-trains are deterred by bad connections and often either ignore the train altogether or drive to Maidenhead, thereby exacerbating the pressure on parking arrangements. NH advised that part of the problem lay with organisation of the network in that Network Rail is now solely responsible for performance (prior to the 2005 Railways Act this responsibility had been shared with the train operating companies). Frustration with the local timetable and length of journey times has encouraged a number of people to revert to road and not renew season-tickets. Getting more robust peaktime services matching customer needs is vital to FGW being seen to be responsive to local needs (including off-peak travellers). RR advised that 4 or 5 minutes was the target for timetabling connections at Maidenhead. Some recent connectional problems off the branch due to late running of trains were highlighted.

Fares collection and on-train ticket inspections were reviewed. There was general disappointment at the lack of frequency / consistency of checking tickets - both on branch-line trains and further afield. Where there are ticket-barriers there is obviously a check – but not all stations have that facility. RR advised there are plans to increase the number of gates at Paddington. People feel safer if they know there is someone aboard the train whose job is to go through the train and inspect tickets as well as answering queries. This presence also helps to reduce vandalism and anti-social behaviour which is a problem on certain trains. RR advised that there are plans to install CCTV on all the 'Turbo' units as well as increasing the number of revenue protection staff. FGW driver-only trains do not have a guard (unlike Southwest Trains).

Trackside litter and station untidiness was mentioned – not only customers' detritus but also that of contractors. On-station contractors are supposed to leave the place tidy and station managers are responsible for enforcing this. It is down to Network Rail for trackside cleanliness, and this is an on-going issue as they do not appear to be clearing trackside litter and clutter as regularly as we would like. Sometimes the problem is local supervision.

The suggestion that a Network Rail representative might be invited to the meeting was proffered. NH advised that it will be considered in future – it had been tried before with negative response from the old Railtrack.

NH asked if any volunteers would be willing to keep a log of journeys – we have a form if one is required. One of the travellers from Henley recently did a log for a few days – his problems mirrored the trials and tribulations for those travelling from Marlow and Maidenhead.

NH thanked all for attending - the meeting closed at 2155hrs.

AGM 2008

Please note that the next AGM will be held on Friday March 14th March 2008 at Bourne End Community Centre, (this is earlier than usual due to timing of the Easter holidays).