

HARBOROUGH RAIL USERS

Annual General Meeting 27th November 2020

Annual Report of the Chair of Harborough Rail Users

INTRODUCTION

This report sets out the main events for Harborough Rail Users (HRU) over the year to November 2020. The past year has certainly been the most unusual for everyone and probably the most challenging for the railway industry in our lifetimes.

Despite the requirement in the HRU Constitution for a minimum of two Committee meetings to be held between AGMs, only one Committee meeting took place since our 11th November 2019 AGM. This was on 20th January and the main topic was the consultation on the EMR timetable planned from December 2020. After the lockdown, we had hoped the situation would ease sufficiently to allow a meeting to be held in late summer. However, by then the Covid figures were heading the wrong way and a meeting became impossible. The Committee has kept in touch by email, however.

I would like to record here appreciation of the considerable efforts of EMR and their staff, supported by their colleagues in Network Rail and elsewhere, in maintaining as good a train service as they have throughout the Covid crisis. Though forced to reduce the service in the early part of the crisis, EMR worked hard in the spring and summer to rebuild the timetable back to almost 100% of normal, despite greatly reduced passenger numbers. However, as EMR's own Commercial Director has remarked, even if only one person was on a train, the journey is important to that person. I know from discussions with EMR that the interim train service plans have been prepared with reference to the locations of the hospitals around their network, for example. It is only fair to recognise the efforts taken to provide at least a sufficient service to support key workers, hospitals and schools.



Market Harborough station: a major asset for the town and district.

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THE PAST YEAR

At our AGM in 2019, we identified five main campaign topics and below I set out HRU's activities with each of these in turn:

MARKET HARBOROUGH STATION – INCLUDING REBUILD AND FACILITIES

Meetings with Network Rail at the station: 19th November 2019 and 10th February 2020

At her invitation, I met with Network Rail's Communications Manager at the station. She wanted to discuss the completion and opening in December of the car park extension and the full length of southbound platform 2, and commemorative events that were being planned to mark the completion of this phase of the scheme. We discussed a commemorative leaflet that NR were intending to issue, plus a more significant public opening event in the spring, when further improvements were scheduled to take place including cycle parking and permanent toilet facilities. This was followed by a similar meeting on 10th February, following up progress with various things including the long-awaited reopening of the subway and the southern end of platform 2.

Car Park extension opens: 15th December 2019

The extended car park at Market Harborough station opened as planned on 15th December, the same day as the new timetable came into operation. The car park extension added 200 spaces to the 300 already in place, which were regularly full by early morning. Usage was steadily growing until this was abruptly ended by Covid-19. On one occasion in early May, I counted only four cars, though this did recover somewhat by late summer.

We made representations to EMR about motorcycle parking and an area near the ticket machine shelter has now been designated for this.

Station usage – continued growth, pre-Covid: 15th January 2020

The government's Office of Rail and Road (ORR) publishes annual data on rail passenger numbers. Market Harborough saw further growth, with a modest increase of 1.5% to a total of 907,770 rail journeys beginning or ending at the station during 2018-19. This is over three times the 296,838 recorded in 1997-98; proof that if a good train service is provided, people will use it. We await the figures for 2019-20, due on 1st December, which saw the blockade in May and June 2019 plus numerous weekend closures for engineering work. However, these figures now look rather meaningless as the coronavirus crisis since March has had a devastating effect. Clearly, the present level of usage makes the present service unsustainable and this surely points to our main campaign topic for the forthcoming year.

Opening of the subway and full length of Platform 2: 17th February 2020

Having been postponed from 15th December awaiting the necessary sign-offs, the subway reopened on 17th February and with it the full length of southbound Platform 2 also opened. Gone are the days when people alighting from a southbound train had make sure they were towards the front to be sure of being next to a door at the platform.

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Some finishing off was still needed, such as glazing the roof of the short projecting canopy at the top of the subway steps. Installation of this was prevented by Storm Dennis over the preceding weekend. However, credit is due to the contractors, who continued with the main work despite the storm and ensured that the platform and subway were open for use with the first train on Monday.

It was pleasing to see in September that contractors Amey, who took over from collapsed previous contractor Carillion, won *Infrastructure Achievement of the Year* in the prestigious National Rail Awards 2020 for the Market Harborough Line Speed and Station Improvement project. This is a major accolade in the 'Railway Oscars' and we congratulate the teams involved.

Cycling facilities at the station

As long ago as Monday 6th April, work started on the cycle hub. Cycle parking at the station has been poor for many years and the hub is a long-awaited improvement. The building, which is certainly impressive in scale, was completed in September but opening was delayed by snagging works until Monday 16th November. It has attracted some local controversy, however, for the visual impact on the station forecourt when other less conspicuous sites appeared to have been available in either the old or new car park areas. These alternative locations were ruled out for safety or land-use reasons.



No hiding behind the bike shed. The new cycle hub, 26th September 2020, prior to opening.

Though welcoming the cycle hub facility, we have continued to call for some covered 'casual' cycle parking in addition to the hub, for non-regular users. At least the three black plastic pods in the foreground of the picture above have been retained for casual use.

Market Harborough in Bloom

On Tuesday 26th May, I and members of Market Harborough in Bloom (MHIB) had a walk around the station area including the car park, access road, and the 'stationmaster's garden', which is the triangle of waste ground between the foot of the car park access road and the car-wash next to Halfords. MHIB are the designated 'adopters' of the station and are keen to re-establish a presence there. HRU are keen to support them.

We discussed ideas for amenity planting to soften the rather stark landscaping around the station. We also inspected the two old platform trolleys that were used as planters on the old northbound platform and were dumped in the long grass by the old car park approach while the rebuilding work took place. Network Rail kindly gave us access to them and said we could take them away for refurbishment. The intention is to reinstate them as bases for decorative planting somewhere on the station. The gravelled area next to the steps from the new car park to platform 2 has been earmarked as one possible location; somewhere near the top of the ramp from the booking office once the 1970s toilet block has been demolished is another.

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Contractors removing the temporary sheet-piling next to the car park access road, 6th February 2020. The patch of rough ground in the right foreground is known as 'the stationmaster's garden'. It is hoped that some amenity planting can be done here by volunteers to smarten it up.

The old yard-lamp behind the left-hand end of the piling was the last of a number of these at Market Harborough. It is now at the Northampton & Lamport Railway.

On Friday 23rd October, the trolleys were removed to the workshop of local retired engineer Phil Clark, who is kindly restoring them at no cost except for some materials. I am also pleased to acknowledge the generous donation by Glenmere Timber on Gores Lane of sufficient hardwood to replace the planked decks of the trolleys. The pictures below show one of the trolleys as they were when we retrieved them, and progress at the time of writing.



In the long grass. One of the trolleys dumped by the old car park access ramp, 26th May 2020.



Making progress. In the workshop, 17th November 2020.

The Engine Room cafe

The Covid-19 pandemic claimed another victim in August, when it became known that the Engine Room café shop and coffee van at the station would not be reopening. The team in the shop were good friends of HRU and we wish them all well in whatever the future holds for them. We also hope EMR will be successful in attracting a new tenant for the shop unit so that this valuable facility can be reinstated when circumstances permit.

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Toilets

The Covid pandemic has affected various plans, with many things put on hold. However, there were unofficial reports in recent weeks that work may be soon to start on replacement of the toilets at the station. The unsatisfactory 1970s building on Platform 1 at the top of the ramp from the booking office has been out of use for many months, with a temporary portable toilet cabin in the forecourt. I have asked EMR about what is planned, and I await a response.

Market Harborough has also been promised some platform canopy but, again, details are awaited. However, the previously promised 'living lounge' waiting room proposal appears to have been abandoned, at least for the time being.



Waiting to go. The now-disused 1970s toilet and waiting room block at the top of the ramp on Platform 1. This is due to be replaced by new facilities, though details are awaited.

TRAIN SERVICES

New timetable: 15th December 2019

The new timetable that came into effect on 15th December 2019 had more-or-less no changes for Market Harborough. However, we did gain a stop on the 18:34 weekday service from St Pancras. This plugs a previous 42-minute gap in the evening peak timetable; something we had wanted resolved for some time. We lost our stop on the 19:01 from St Pancras, but the next following train for Market Harborough is at 19:04, three minutes later! Other than that, apart from minor re-timings by the odd minute here or there, there are no changes.

Meeting with EMR: 3rd February 2020

At her invitation, I met EMR's Stakeholder Manager at the station on 3rd February. We covered a number of topics, including: management changes at EMR; the December 2020 timetable plans (see next item); train punctuality; the planned cycle hub at the station; smartcards; station tannoy announcements; rolling stock changes; and the car park. As always, it was a very open discussion and numerous points were noted for referral to the relevant people in EMR.

HRU responds to EMR December 2020 timetable consultation: 3rd February 2020

The Midland Main Line was due to see a major re-cast of its train services from December 2020, when the electrification from Bedford to Kettering and Corby was due to open. Corby will have two trains per hour (2tph) to and from London, calling at all EMR intermediate stations. Because of this, the InterCity trains that serve Market Harborough will stop only at Kettering on their way to or from St Pancras. We will still have two trains per hour, at roughly half-hourly intervals, with Nottingham via Leicester being the other destination. London to

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Sheffield via Derby will also have 2tph but these will run non-stop between St Pancras and Leicester.

We submitted our comments on 3rd February:

- Broadly supporting the split between the InterCity and Electric services, which gives us fast London journeys but also connections at Kettering every half hour with the intermediate stations.
- Recognising that the Electric services will reduce overcrowding on our trains to and from London.
- Welcoming earlier morning first trains and later evening last trains - though in both cases the planned enhancements could be improved.
- Welcoming the reinstatement of trains between Wellingborough and Bedford in place of the temporary replacement bus.
- However, we are concerned about the loss of through services to and from Luton Airport Parkway and have called for some of our InterCity trains to stop there.
- Subject to the actual timetables, we are concerned about connection times at Leicester for those travelling to stations on the route to Derby and Sheffield.
- We have repeated previous requests for an earlier first northbound train on Sundays.

Our response was copied to Neil O'Brien MP and to leading and local members of Harbrough District Council and Leicestershire County Council. The consultation closed on 14th February, to be followed by analysis of responses and much work to design the optimum timetable for this very congested route.

The new timetable has been postponed to May 2021, however, because of Covid-19; see further below.

Coronavirus: March 2020



Warning sign. EMR sign in the booking office window, 19th May 2020, sadly deterring rail travel. Note the approximate homage to 1950s-style British Railways 'totem' design. Reflected in the glass is the logo of The Engine Room café, another much-regretted casualty of the downturn caused by coronavirus.

We were all taken by surprise by the sudden and explosive spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus global pandemic. EMR continued to run as much of a service as they could, but reduced services to one an hour each way between St Pancras and Nottingham from Monday 23rd March. On that day, the government announced a six-month suspension of all rail franchises

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and their replacement with Emergency Measures Agreements. These transferred all revenue and cost risk to the government, with operators such as EMR running the reduced day-to-day services in return for a small management fee. On Thursday 26th March, EMR reintroduced peak-time Bedford calls on three morning Nottingham – St Pancras trains and four evening St Pancras – Nottingham trains (one of which does not stop at Market Harbrough). In April, EMR temporarily reduced the number of InterCity 125 high-speed trains (HSTs) in service to just two each day, citing the infection risks to passengers and staff from touching the external door handles as one reason for taking most of them out of service.

On Monday 18th May, EMR reinstated many services including two an hour each way between Nottingham and London, both calling at Market Harbrough. This largely reinstated our normal service pattern and supplemented two an hour each way between Sheffield and London, not stopping at Market Harbrough. Corby, however, only had an hourly shuttle to and from Kettering. One effect for us was the removal of the temporarily reinstated peak-time calls at Bedford and Luton, with bus connections between Wellingborough and Bedford being reintroduced. The reason given was social distancing, the aim being to direct Bedford and Luton passengers to Thameslink rather than EMR services.

EMR continued to run a remarkably good service in the circumstances, culminating in resumption of almost a full service from Monday 7th September. I say almost, because we lost the Market Harbrough stop in the 17:19 from St Pancras; this was to improve its punctuality and help avoid knock-on delays to Thameslink. As there are trains either side of it at 17:05 and 17:34 from St Pancras, this was a pragmatic step. However, we need to keep an eye on adjustments of this kind.



Market Harbrough in lockdown. An HST waits at the platform with the 11:15 to Nottingham, 19th May 2020.

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A casualty of Covid-19 is the Corby electrification and the associated changes to the whole Midland Main Line timetable. Though the overhead wiring to Corby was energised in mid-August, electric services will not now be introduced until the May 2021 timetable change. One reason is that social distancing makes driver training on the electric stock difficult.

ROLLING STOCK

Rolling stock plans for the short- and longer-term have now been published. We await details of the interior fit-out of the new Hitachi bi-mode (diesel + electric) trains that are due to enter service from 2022.

'Red InterCity trains': 10th February 2020



In the blue corner: two ex-EMT HSTs call at Market Harborough on 18th August 2020.

The ex-East Midlands Trains fleet of InterCity 125 high-speed trains, (HSTs), though popular with many passengers, became non-compliant with new accessibility regulations on 1st January 2020. However, the new bi-mode fleet will not enter service until 2022-23. EMR therefore gained a derogation from the Department for Transport to continue to operate these HSTs until the end of July, by when they were due to be replaced by other interim rolling stock.

For us, this means the 'red InterCity trains', actually HSTs of similar vintage, transferred from the East Coast Main Line, and still wearing the red LNER (ex-Virgin Trains) livery. They will only be with us for a short time, so EMR decided it was not worth repainting them.

Though of similar age, they were refurbished in 2016 to include better wheelchair space and accessible toilets (in coach E), plus audio and visual passenger information and other upgrades. The first one of a fleet of nine was due to enter service with EMR on 10th February. There has been some chopping and changing in the HST fleet, with ex-LNER locomotives powering blue ex-EMT carriages, some of which remain in use at the time of writing in November 2020.

In the red corner: two HST power-cars in ex-LNER (Virgin Trains) red livery meet at Market Harborough on 5th November 2020.

The one on the left is in fact heading an ex-EMT blue set of carriages.



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Aurora heralds new dawn: October 2020

EMR announced on 26th October that the new Hitachi bi-mode trains, which will enter full passenger service in 2023, are to be known as 'Aurora' class. Aurora was the Roman goddess of the dawn and this plus the solar-powered electrical night-sky phenomenon of the same name – also known as the Northern Lights – is seen as an appropriate title for these partly electric-powered trains on a revitalised Midland Main Line. Quite what connection any of this has with the East Midlands remains unclear!



*Artist's impression of an EMR Aurora train at speed on non-electrified track.
Image courtesy of EMR.*

Broadly similar Hitachi trains are in widespread use on LNER and GWR InterCity services out of Kings Cross and Paddington respectively. These have been criticised for having less comfortable seating than their predecessors. As the 'Auroras' will provide all of our services at Market Harborough, I have raised this with EMR, who promise that theirs will be different! EMR are working with a Derby-based design consultancy firm on the interior fit-out of the trains including seating and accessibility, and we await further details. Dare we speculate that one legacy of Covid may be a re-think of the high-density seating on modern trains?!

ELECTRIFICATION

Associated with the Corby line electrification and the planned power substation at Braybrooke, we support the intended 'last mile' electrification into Market Harborough. A tangible bit of evidence was the appearance during the summer of numbered wooden pegs driven into the ground behind our two platforms in pairs facing each other across the layout. Informed sources tell me these indicate locations for electrification masts.

We support extension of electrification northwards as well and hope a decision on this is made sooner rather than later.



Pole position? Wooden peg behind Platform 2, marking where an electrification mast may be placed.

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Electrification of the whole main line through to Nottingham and Sheffield has been included in Network Rail's 'Project Speed' programme of six major schemes aimed at accelerating infrastructure investment. This is not the same as actual go-ahead, but it is intended to show the Department for Transport how enhancements could be delivered quickly and effectively. There is widespread political support for it along the whole route.

NORTHAMPTON LINE

Our final campaign topic concerns the suggestion that emerged in a public consultation in late 2019 of reopening the line to Northampton, albeit with new construction around the outskirts of the town to replace the section lost to redevelopment. Though we in HRU are not actively campaigning for the Northampton line, we would welcome it as it would greatly widen travel opportunities. It is pleasing that the England's Economic Heartland sub-national transport body, which covers a large area of the south-east Midlands including the whole of Northamptonshire, recognises the poor rail connectivity across Northamptonshire on a 'northern arc' between Oxford, Northampton and Peterborough. However, this scheme is probably best described as 'long-term', and in the meantime, we maintain a watching brief.

I was interviewed both by BBC Radio Northampton on 9th January and *Heritage Railway* magazine about it; the latter in the context of the preserved Northampton & Lamport Railway, which occupies a short section of the line. With the blessing of Amey, the Market Harborough track realignment contractors, members of the Northampton & Lamport Railway recovered two trailer-loads of old wooden sleepers plus the last yard-lamp from Market Harborough's former sidings. The sidings were the last remnant of the station goods yard and had latterly been used for stabling track engineering machines. The sleepers were taken to Boughton on the Northampton & Lamport Railway, possibly to be used for trackwork at the new station being built there.

OTHER

Rail fares increase announcement: 19th August 2020

An unwelcome annual event is the announcement of next year's increase in regulated fares. These cover about 45% of all tickets, including Anytime day tickets, seasons and off-peak fares. They are based on the Retail Prices Index (RPI) for the previous July, even though this is no longer an official national statistic, and the figure this time is 1.6%. It acts as a cap on the average of a 'basket' of fares. Many fares are unregulated, including advance and first-class tickets; these are left to the train companies to determine.

Along with many others, HRU have expressed dismay at the increase. We wrote to Harborough MP Neil O'Brien to this effect, adding our voice to those calling for the increase to be cancelled as the rail industry seeks to attract passengers back after such a torrid year, coupled with reform of season tickets to make them viable for part-time commuters. At least the latter is very much on the industry's agenda.

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CONCLUSIONS

A very unusual year, with the coronavirus crisis dominating every aspect of life. Nonetheless, the railway continued to operate throughout and we in HRU have continued to make our voice heard on the various matters that affect our station and train service. Though face-to-face meetings have not been possible for most of the year, I remain grateful for the willingness of EMR, Network Rail and others to discuss various matters, and for the support of the local MP and councillors as we continue to seek the best for all local rail users. By means of this and through supporting relevant community-based activities such as Market Harborough in Bloom's work at the station, we must now do our bit to rebuild confidence in the train service. It is only through recovery in passenger numbers that we will be able to retain the level of service we have enjoyed over the past few years.

Finally, I am grateful for all the help and support given by the HRU Committee through the year, including our previous and present treasurers for their forbearance during the protracted process of changing the group's bank account.

Steve Jones

Chair

Harborough Rail Users

27th November 2020

<https://www.harborough-rail.org.uk/>

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Harborough Rail Users is an independent voluntary group that seeks to represent all users of Market Harborough station, whether regular commuters or occasional travellers.

We campaigned successfully to retain the half-hourly train service in the previous East Midlands Trains franchise and we aim to ensure that Market Harborough's rail users continue to be well served.