

HARBOROUGH RAIL USERS

Annual General Meeting 26th November 2021

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 2021. It has been another interesting year, starting in lockdown because of the Covid pandemic, but with much activity resuming during the year as restrictions eased. Rail usage has experienced some recovery, even seeing some overcrowding on the trains, but the Covid threat has not gone away. It is with that caution in mind that we are holding the 2021 AGM online on Zoom.

HARBOROUGH RAIL USERS

Harborough Rail Users is an independent voluntary group that seeks to represent all users of Market Harborough station, whether regular commuters or occasional travellers. Though small, HRU is formally constituted and has an elected Committee, but there is no formal membership and no subscriptions. Anyone genuinely interested in the station and train service at Market Harborough is welcome to get involved.

The HRU Constitution requires a minimum of two Committee meetings to be held between AGMs. Since the last AGM, on 27th November 2020, the Committee met:

- On 5th February 2021, on Zoom, chiefly to discuss the consultation then under way regarding the new toilets and waiting room building.
- On 26th August, at the station, chiefly to discuss the current state of play on the remaining works at the station.
- On 27th September, at The Oat Hill pub restaurant on Kettering Road, to consider current topics and think about the forthcoming AGM. Unfortunately, however, this meeting was not quorate, so had no executive authority.

Most HRU business is conducted by email. This has remained active throughout the year, both within the group and in its dealings with EMR, Network Rail and others.

HRU is required by its constitution to maintain a bank account. Having gone through a considerable amount of bureaucracy last year to establish a new account with HSBC after they had summarily closed the old one, we were advised in late summer that they would be imposing a monthly £5 charge just for having the account. Given that we are a small voluntary organisation with very little financial business (though there is some), our Treasurer James Bourne and I decided to close the HSBC account. We did this and opened a new account with Lloyds in late October. Related to the previous banking changes, a minor change to the HRU Constitution was agreed by the Committee in December 2020 to provide for internet banking; this was essentially a formality.

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THE PAST YEAR

We normally expect to meet with the train operating company, currently East Midlands Railway (EMR), at least once a year. The continued pandemic has meant that this has not happened. However, there has been regular communication with EMR, and with Network Rail, throughout the year by email and phone. In addition, I attended EMR's annual Stakeholder Conference, which was a physical meeting, in Nottingham on 9th November. It is fair to say that HRU retains a good working relationship with both rail companies.

At our AGM in 2021, we reaffirmed our five main campaign topics from the previous year. Set out below are developments and HRU's activities regarding each of these in turn.

TRAIN SERVICES

Temporary timetables: 14th December 2020 and 18th January 2021

The Covid crisis meant numerous reiterations to the timetable. The major recast of the entire main line timetable that was due from December 2020 was postponed until May 2021. However, on 14th December there were some changes, and another revised timetable took effect from Monday 18th January. Weekday changes for the Intercity route were minimal but some Saturday trains between St Pancras and Nottingham, all of which called at Market Harborough, were withdrawn. The reason was an increased level of Covid-related absence among traincrew staff. EMR quite rightly decided to reduce advertised services rather than have ad hoc cancellations day by day.

Reinstatement of services: 29th March and 12th April 2021

On 29th March, some reinstatement took place, with EMR announcing that across their network they were stepping up from 81% to 92% of the normal timetable. Much of this was on their Regional services; the Intercity route was already at quite a high level. The official messaging changed from 'Stay at Home' to 'Minimise Travel', and there was an evident uplift in the usage of the station and the trains. Shortly after, on 12th April, there was a nationwide reinstatement of services as lockdown restrictions were eased to allow, among other things, 'non-essential retail' and 'outdoor hospitality' to reopen. However, despite the major success of the vaccination programme, the requirements for social distancing and face-coverings remained in place. Cleaning on trains and at stations has also been very evident throughout, and this continues.

New timetable: 16th May 2021

On 3rd February, EMR published the results of the major consultation they undertook back in December 2019 on the reconfigured Midland Main Line timetable that was due to come into effect with the Corby electrification in December 2020. Covid forced a postponement to May 2021. HRU had submitted a detailed response to the consultation in February 2020 and the consultation results identified that some of the things we had called for would be accommodated in the new timetable. These included an earlier first arrival into St Pancras, a later last southbound train on weekdays, and a regular-interval timetable more-or-less throughout the day. Indeed, the timetable has been described to me as 'the best timetable we have ever had'.

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Sunday disruption

Tragically, EMR has suffered from industrial disputes since the summer, which continue at the time of writing. This has chiefly affected Sunday services and, though EMR has run a remarkably good service, there have been long gaps when individual trains are cancelled. We made representations to EMR asking them to put Market Harborough stops on the Sheffield trains either side of cancelled Nottingham services in this event, something they have done when the timetable has been thinned as a result of engineering work. However, there remain problems when trains are cancelled.

Most of our trains are formed of single Meridian units of only four or five carriages, despite trains getting busier. We raised this with EMR, who reported that it was a cost-saving measure related to reduced numbers travelling. Some double formations were operating, however, especially on Sundays. EMR have said that more double-unit formations are due to resume with the December 2021 timetable.



Doubling up. The 16:34 to Nottingham (15:35 from St Pancras) departs Market Harborough on Sunday 19th September, formed of two Meridian units. The far one, leading, is in the EMR Intercity livery, the nearer one is still in the old Stagecoach East Midlands Trains colours.

ROLLING STOCK

The year has seen some changes in rolling stock, and we await the new Hitachi bi-mode (diesel + electric) trains that are due to enter service from 2023. The first of these is now being built.

Class 180 trains enter service from Market Harborough

Partly to cover for the loss of the HSTs, EMR received four Class 180 diesel multiple unit trains transferred from Hull Trains. The first of these entered service on Monday 14th December 2020, on a small number of services to and from St Pancras. Though broadly similar to the Meridian trains, I think they are more comfortable, with more spacious accommodation and better light-flow. Apart from these, our entire service is now provided by Meridians.

High-Speed Trains (HSTs) withdrawn: 15th May 2021

The ex-East Midlands Trains blue liveried HSTs were officially withdrawn from Friday 11th December 2020. The ex-LNER red HSTs were all reduced to 6-car sets at the same time, the reduced weight enabling better performance and timekeeping as well as reduced operating and maintenance costs. By March 2021, the HST fleet was reduced to three, with only two in use on any given day. However, EMR did not want them to fade away unnoticed, and they beautifully repainted power-car 43102 in late 1980s-style InterCity 'Swallow' livery. This was one of a pair that achieved the world speed record for diesel trains of 148.5mph on 1st

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November 1987 on a test run between Northallerton and York; a record that still stands. On withdrawal, it was destined for the National Railway Museum in York. Then, on 14th April, No 43274 was outshopped in EMR's purple livery, which it carried surprisingly well.



The Journey Shrinker. HST power-car 43102, beautifully restored in BR InterCity 'Swallow' livery, leads the 15:29 Market Harborough to Nottingham on 1st March 2021.



Speed King: HST power-car 43274, freshly painted in EMR deep purple, at the head of the 16:29 Market Harborough to Nottingham on 16th April 2021.

The new timetable from Sunday 16th May saw the Midland Main Line operate without HSTs for the first time since 1982. I travelled on the very last scheduled HST from Market Harborough, the 19:29 to Leeds on Saturday 15th, though only as far as Leicester.



The very last one. Our last scheduled HST at Market Harborough was the 19:29 to Leeds (18:34 from St Pancras) on a soggy Saturday 15th May. On this day, Leicester City won the FA Cup at Wembley, but Covid-19 restricted the opportunities for fans to go to the game. In any case, the 18:34 departure from St Pancras was too early for returning fans, so the train was the preserve of genuine travellers and HST well-wishers.

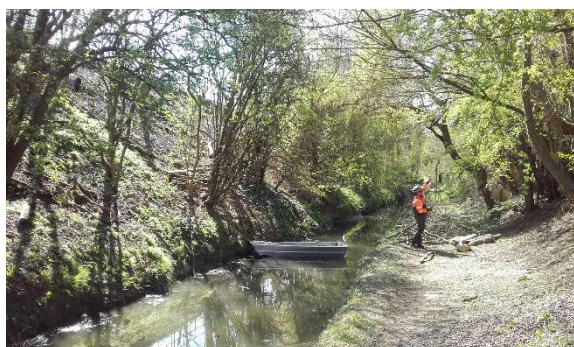
ELECTRIFICATION

HRU has long supported the intended electrification into Market Harborough, and there have been tentative signs of physical progress throughout the year. Network Rail announced on 10th February that 'vegetation management', to cut back trees that would encroach on overhead wires, would start on 22nd February. The work was much in evidence in April, along with some tidying up behind Platform 1 at the station, including removal of the old car park lamp-posts. This area has now become the site compound for electrification contractors, SPL Powerlines.

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Clearing the way. Contractors removing vegetation from the railway embankment south of the station on 6th April 2021, in preparation for electrification. They had set up a temporary compound in the Welland Quarter 'overflow' car park. Is this the first boat to use the River Jordan?



Clearing away. Contractors load the old car park lamp-posts onto a lorry for removal, 6th April 2021. Surveying work in preparation for the planned new waiting room and toilets building also happened around this time.

On 8th April, it was announced that work was starting on the new power substation near Braybrooke to power the upgraded electrification. It is being provided by National Grid, feeding power from the high-voltage line that crosses the railway there, and is due to be completed by autumn 2022. Groundwork is much in evidence at the time of writing.



Entrance to the SPL Powerlines electrification compound, via the old car park access road, 23rd October 2021.

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 was not the same as actual go-ahead; rather, it was intended to show the Department for Transport how enhancements could be delivered quickly and effectively, following delays and overspends elsewhere. There is widespread political support for it along the whole route.

The publication of the Government's *Integrated Rail Plan* on 18th November 2021 is very significant. It

confirms the widely expected curtailment of HS2's 'eastern leg' to Leeds, such that only the section between Birmingham and East Midlands Parkway looks likely to be built, and even that will not open until the early to mid-2040s. Access to the north would then be via an upgraded and electrified Midland Main Line to Sheffield. Accompanying that was an announcement of full electrification of the line north from Kettering, via Market Harborough, to Nottingham and Sheffield. This is due to be completed by the end of the decade and I was briefly interviewed about it by *ITV Central News* at the station on 19th November.

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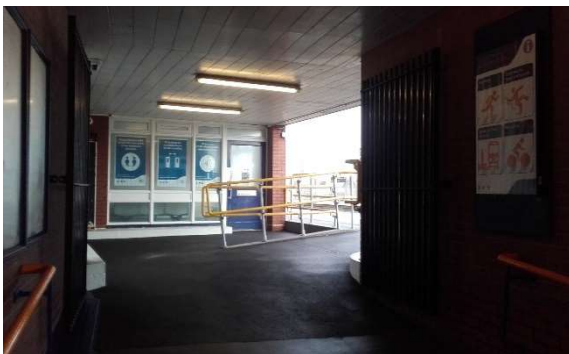
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MARKET HARBOROUGH STATION

Though the station was rebuilt at platform level in 2019 and is vastly better suited to its purpose as a result, several things were not completed at that time. HRU continues to pursue various improvements.

Consultation on new toilets and waiting room building on Platform 1: February 2021

On 29th January, consulting engineers JNP Group invited HRU to take part in a consultation on proposals to demolish the now-closed 1970s building at the south end of Platform 1 and construct a new building with toilets and a waiting room further along the platform. The short connecting ramp between the original Victorian ramp up from the booking office and the new platform is to be reconstructed with a shallower angle of slope, and a small canopy installed at the top of the ramp in place of the 1970s building. It is intended that all this will be completed by spring 2022 and it is long overdue. HRU responded on 12th February, setting out our thoughts on the location of the new building; the amenity and accessibility implications, (especially as the new platforms are surprisingly narrow given the generous availability of land); whether the disabled-accessible toilet will be of the 'changing places' kind; the furnishing of the waiting room; and the weather protection at the top of the ramp once the 1970s building has gone. We also called for the new structures to have some 'warmth' in their design, including sympathetic architectural treatment of the area around the top of the Victorian ramp.



On the way out. The present approach to Platform 1, showing the 1970s waiting room and temporary ramp that are to be demolished. Though no longer fit for purpose, the building provides some weather protection for the ramp down to the booking office, which would be a wind-tunnel without it!



Getting desperate. The previous temporary toilet cabin in the station forecourt. Since this picture was taken in February 2021, this toilet cabin was replaced in June by another on the opposite side of the forecourt. New facilities are desperately needed and the proposed new building on Platform 1 will allow the temporary cabin to be removed and the forecourt tidied up.

Forecourt parking revised – July 2021

Meeting someone off a train on 16th July, I noticed that the forecourt had freshly painted markings for six disabled parking bays on the west side, where the first temporary toilet block had been. There was also a small area for taxis on the east side, and a new 'Give Way' line for the turning circle in front of the cycle hub. I had been asking about plans for the forecourt and had understood that it was to be revised once the new permanent toilets were built and the temporary ones had gone, probably in early 2022. These new markings came as a surprise! Of course, it remains unfinished. The location of the cycle hub in the forecourt has also attracted local controversy; it would have been better placed next to Platform 2.

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On a related note, the short-stay bays in front of the main car park are quite inadequate. There are markings for only four spaces, marked 'Drop-off only, no waiting', with no evident provision for people meeting arriving passengers. Moreover, this area is used by rail-replacement buses, when even this minimal provision is unavailable! Considering the size of the main car park, this seems very meagre, and is something we are pursuing.

We also support the idea of a safety barrier at the edge of the pavement outside the main front doors, to channel departing pedestrians left or right along the pavements and stop children running out into the vehicle area.



Newly marked out disabled parking bays at the front of the main building on 16th July 2021. Taxis have been moved to an area off-picture to the right, backing onto the railway embankment.

Station usage – continued growth pre-Covid: figures published 1st December 2020

The Government's Office of Rail and Road (ORR) publishes annual data on rail passenger numbers. Until Covid took hold in March 2020, Market Harborough saw further growth, with a modest increase of 3.3% to a total of 937,484 rail journeys beginning or ending at the station during March 2019 to February 2020 inclusive, the last full pre-Covid reporting year. This growth was encouraging, as the year included the 'blockade' for the station rebuilding in May and June 2019 plus numerous weekend closures for engineering work.

However, these figures were overtaken by the coronavirus crisis. Usage remained very low in the early part of 2021, though the return to schools from 8th March saw an upturn in travel, with school pupils themselves as well as parents able to return to work as a result. EMR reported in early November that their revenue overall was back to about 65%. This reflects leisure travel being back to something approaching pre-Covid levels, offset by much slower recovery in commuting and business travel. Commuting travel now has its peaks mid-week.



Back inside. The waiting rooms reopened, albeit with limited capacity, during the last week of March as Covid-19 precautions began to ease. Platform 1, 31st March 2021.

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Covid restrictions were further eased on Monday 19th July, heralded for a time as 'Freedom Day'. EMR advised that there would be no change to Covid-safe requirements for staff, nor any reduction in the sanitisation regime for trains and stations. Though the legal requirement had gone, all train operators adopted an advisory policy of *'In crowded spaces, wear a face covering out of respect for others'*. We have commented to EMR on this in the context of crowding on the temporarily shortened trains.



Discussions with Network Rail about the station

I have been in contact with Network Rail's Communications Manager at various times during the year. We would normally meet at the station, but Covid restrictions meant phone conversations and emails instead. We have discussed the new toilets + waiting room building at the station; the station forecourt; platform shelter; electrification; and the restored parcels trolleys that are intended for a planting scheme by Market Harborough in Bloom. (The trolleys are now in secure storage, awaiting reinstatement at the station once the 1970s building has gone. Further planting is planned for the area around the car park steps to Platform 2.)

Various matters remain to be resolved, and further information is awaited. The HRU Committee meeting at the station on 26th August also considered all this.

'Unsightly mess'

On the subject of smartening up the station, local MP Neil O'Brien criticised the 'unsightly mess' of the weed-growth behind the platforms and in the large triangle of land behind the south end of Platform 2. This was reported in the *Harborough Mail* and on the BBC News website on 28th October. The following week, a gang of orange-men were busy weeding the ground. Neil was due to visit the station on 5th November...



I took the opportunity to bring him up to speed with the various remaining works at the station as noted above.

HRU Noticeboard



On 21st September 2021, EMR installed a replacement noticeboard for HRU. The old one disappeared from its position on the subway approach wall during the station rebuilding works in 2019 and no-one appears to know what happened to it! EMR kindly arranged for a replacement, which eventually appeared next to the site of the old one. Though we regret the loss of the old noticeboard, we are grateful to EMR for providing a replacement. The surrounding wall was repainted in early November, smartening up this area of the station.

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NORTHAMPTON LINE

Though not an active campaign, the possibility of reopening of the line to Northampton is raised from time to time.

England's Economic Heartland (EEH) is the sub-national transport body (SNTB) that covers a broad sweep of the south midlands and northern home counties and includes Northamptonshire. In June 2021, EEH invited HRU to contribute to a public 'call for evidence' on the first of several 'connectivity studies', covering the 'northern arc' between Oxford, Northampton and Peterborough. This is not confined to rail, or even physical transport in an age of video conferencing. However, it acknowledges that the railways in the region are dominated by the main lines radiating out of London, with little connection between them. The Market Harborough – Northampton line has been mentioned by EEH in the context of this, which is very relevant to us in HRU. We responded on 27th June, noting the poor east-west connectivity at present; welcoming the opportunities that East West Rail will bring for journeys to Oxford and Cambridge via interchange at Bedford; and supporting in principle other proposals for reopening Market Harborough – Northampton and developing a Kettering – Peterborough link. Further studies on other route corridors, including one more directly relevant to Market Harborough – Northampton, are awaited in due course.

OTHER - Fares

Flexi Seasons introduced: 28th June 2021

Something we have been wanting for years was introduced on 28th June, in the form of flexi-seasons. The idea arose when East Midlands Trains (as it was at the time) introduced much tighter time restrictions on the use of off-peak Travelcards, which had been popular for the significant number of people commuting part-time, say, two or three days a week. For them, a full season ticket is not good value, and the usual daily fares are prohibitively expensive. The Covid lockdowns and the resulting widespread adoption of working from home have changed the whole pattern of commuting. It became inevitable that the traditional Monday to Friday peak-time commute was largely a thing of the past, at least for office workers. The railway industry's response is the Flexi Season, giving unlimited travel between two named stations on any 8 days in 28, or two days a week on average.

However, it is not as good as it sounds. Though offering good flexibility, the price is high. For Market Harborough to St Pancras, it is £678.60, or £84.83 per return journey. Though somewhat less than the equivalent Anytime day tickets, it compares poorly with the average daily rate for season tickets. An annual season ticket works out at about £24 per day, or £34 per day if only used on weekdays - and used every day! To be genuinely attractive, Flexi-seasons should be priced within this range, perhaps with longer-duration options to reward loyalty over, for example, a year. We are not alone in being critical of this; there has been much national comment on the per-day discount being modest. It will be interesting to see what the take-up of Flexi Seasons is nationally once the pandemic restrictions end.

At the time of writing, it appears that the annual fares increase will take effect as usual in 2022. We remain of the view that now is not the time for fares increases as the industry seeks to recover from the Covid losses.

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CONCLUSIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Coronavirus continues to have its effect, though this has been easing, and usage of the station and trains has recovered significantly over the year. As a rough barometer of usage, the main car park now sees up to about 200 cars on weekdays, much higher than a year ago. Nonetheless, the railway has operated throughout, and some progress has been made with continued investments. Again, we in HRU have made our voice heard on the various matters that affect our station and train service. 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.



Nearly there: Information screen inside the train as it leaves Kettering with the 11:05 St Pancras to Nottingham on 22nd September 2021.

Finally, I am grateful for all the help and support given by the HRU Committee through the year, including the Treasurer's forbearance in the further changes in the group's bank account.

Steve Jones

Chair

Harborough Rail Users

26th November 2021

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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.

All pictures © Steve Jones unless stated otherwise. The images of the Covid-related signs are photographs of EMR's posters on the station.