

# **HARBOROUGH RAIL USERS**

Annual General Meeting 24<sup>th</sup> November 2022

## **Annual Report of the Chair of Harborough Rail Users**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This report sets out the main events for Harborough Rail Users (HRU) over the year to November 2022. National recovery from Covid has generally continued, though it faltered during the outbreak of the Omicron variant in late winter 2021 and spring 2022. The economy has also been battered by the war in Ukraine, political upheaval in the UK, and a series of industrial disputes on the railways and elsewhere. All this affects usage of the trains, though overcrowding has also returned as a feature of many rail journeys. Despite all that, work continues on the electrification of our line and some continuing improvements to Market Harborough station.

### **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 a formally constituted organisation with 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 26<sup>th</sup> November 2021, the Committee met:

- On 17<sup>th</sup> May 2022; an open meeting at the station, to discuss the continuing works at the station, various matters to do with the train services, overcrowding, fares, and the implications for the station of the Harborough District Council Town Centre Masterplan.
- On 19<sup>th</sup> October 2022; a Committee-only meeting at the Three Swans Hotel, to consider current topics and think about the forthcoming AGM.

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. In November 2022, HRU joined national independent rail campaign group Railfuture. We are grateful to Railfuture for making their Zoom account available to us for this year's AGM.

### **THE PAST YEAR**

We normally expect to meet with the train operating company, currently East Midlands Railway (EMR), at least once a year. Though this has not happened for the group as a whole, I met with EMR's Stakeholder Manager in Market Harborough on 13<sup>th</sup> June; see below. There has also been regular communication with EMR, and with Network Rail, throughout the year by email and telephone. In addition, I have been invited to attend EMR's annual Stakeholder Conference in Nottingham, which is scheduled for 14<sup>th</sup> December. As reported in previous years, HRU maintains a good working relationship with both rail companies.

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

### TRAIN SERVICES AND FARES

#### New timetable: 11<sup>th</sup> December 2021

Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> December saw the new winter timetable introduced across the network. Though in many areas it heralded a reinstatement of services as the pandemic appeared to be diminishing in potency, there was little change for us in Market Harborough. Our services were already more-or-less back to normal, though we were promised an increase in double-unit trains (nine or ten carriages instead of four or five) to provide more capacity on increasingly crowded services. Most changes consisted of re-timings by the odd minute here and there, plus some early morning and late evening trains being replaced by buses for the time being, to allow for overnight electrification work.

On Monday 17<sup>th</sup> January, EMR reduced its timetables because of Covid-related staff absences. We lost four southbound and three northbound trains on weekdays. EMR rightly felt it better to have pre-planned cancellations of more lightly used trains than to have random cancellations day by day. There was concern about overcrowding on some of the remaining services either side of the cancelled trains. However, on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, EMR announced that the full Intercity timetable was to be restored from the following Monday, 28<sup>th</sup>. Many Sunday services on EMR's Regional network were also to be reinstated from 27<sup>th</sup> February.

#### Replacement buses

An early win during the year for HRU was the correction of an anomaly in the timings of replacement buses on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> January. With the line shut between Leicester and Kettering for electrification works, trains were diverted via Corby and Melton. The journey planner websites originally showed no buses connecting with the first two southbound trains at Kettering, but no fewer than four buses arriving in Kettering before the third train – some arriving a good time before it but too late for the previous train! We raised this with EMR and it was soon resolved.

The electrification work also means the last three Intercity trains from St Pancras on weekday evenings are diverted via Corby, with bus connections from Kettering for us. This was shown for the entire December 2021 - May 2022 timetable. We queried this with EMR, who confirmed that, indeed, it will continue until December 2023. Rather than chop and change between running these trains via Market Harborough and via Corby, it is better to have continuity and certainty both for

Network Rail and for passengers. Nonetheless, while accepting it as a reasonable expedient during the engineering works, we expressed our wish to EMR that it does not become permanent or long term, and that the trains be reinstated in due course.



*On the buses. Smart modern coaches provide rail replacement services to Kettering and Leicester at Market Harborough on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2021. The line was closed for electrification work. Picture: Steve Jones*

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### Travelcards

We were alerted in March to a possible threat to London Travelcards, which are popular with day-trippers as well as part-time commuters. As part of its emergency funding settlement from the Government, Transport for London (TfL) was required to “...provide to DfT an impact assessment on different passenger groups of the withdrawal from the travelcard agreement prior to commencing with the withdrawal”. This came as a shock, as removal of Travelcards, with their lack of evening peak restrictions, would be of considerable detriment to many passengers from Market Harborough, and all other stations around London. We wrote to EMR and to Neil O’Brien MP expressing our concerns. A public consultation was due to start on 27<sup>th</sup> May but then did not appear to take place. We trust that wisdom prevailed in the financial settlement that was reached with TfL later in the year. Removing a popular and versatile ticket would have been a very odd thing to do under the requirement’s heading of “consideration of potential new sources of income”!

### Strikes

Tragically, 2022 has been the year of multiple and long-lasting industrial disputes involving no fewer than four unions and lasting for many months. We recognise the efforts EMR have made to provide a degree of service on most strike days, but we remain concerned about the effects on rail users, who have no say in any of this. HRU is strictly non-political, but on 4<sup>th</sup> November we sent an open letter, to be published also in the *Harborough Mail*, to Neil O’Brien MP. In the letter, we called upon all parties, including the Government, to bring about a swift and lasting resolution. Then, on 5<sup>th</sup> November, the strikes were called off, to allow ‘intensive negotiations’ to start. Accordingly, we withdrew both the letter and the press article, in the earnest hope that a settlement is reached. Only then can the railway really recover from the pandemic.

## ROLLING STOCK

The year has seen little change in our rolling stock, and we await the new Hitachi bi-mode (diesel + electric) trains that are due to enter service from late 2023 or 2024. The first of these is now nearing completion and is due to commence testing imminently. Meanwhile, the familiar Meridian diesel trains continue, supplemented by the small sub-fleet of four Class 180 units, which, though broadly similar in nature, offer a more airy travelling environment than the Meridians. These were introduced as a temporary addition to the fleet but came with significant reliability problems. However, they seem to have got over that, and there have been recent suggestions that they may be retained for a time after the Meridians have been replaced.



*One-hundred-and-eighty! An EMR Class 180 prepares to depart from Market Harborough with the 12:04 to Nottingham on a cloudy 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2022. A Class 222 Meridian is shown in the next picture below.*

*Picture: Steve Jones*



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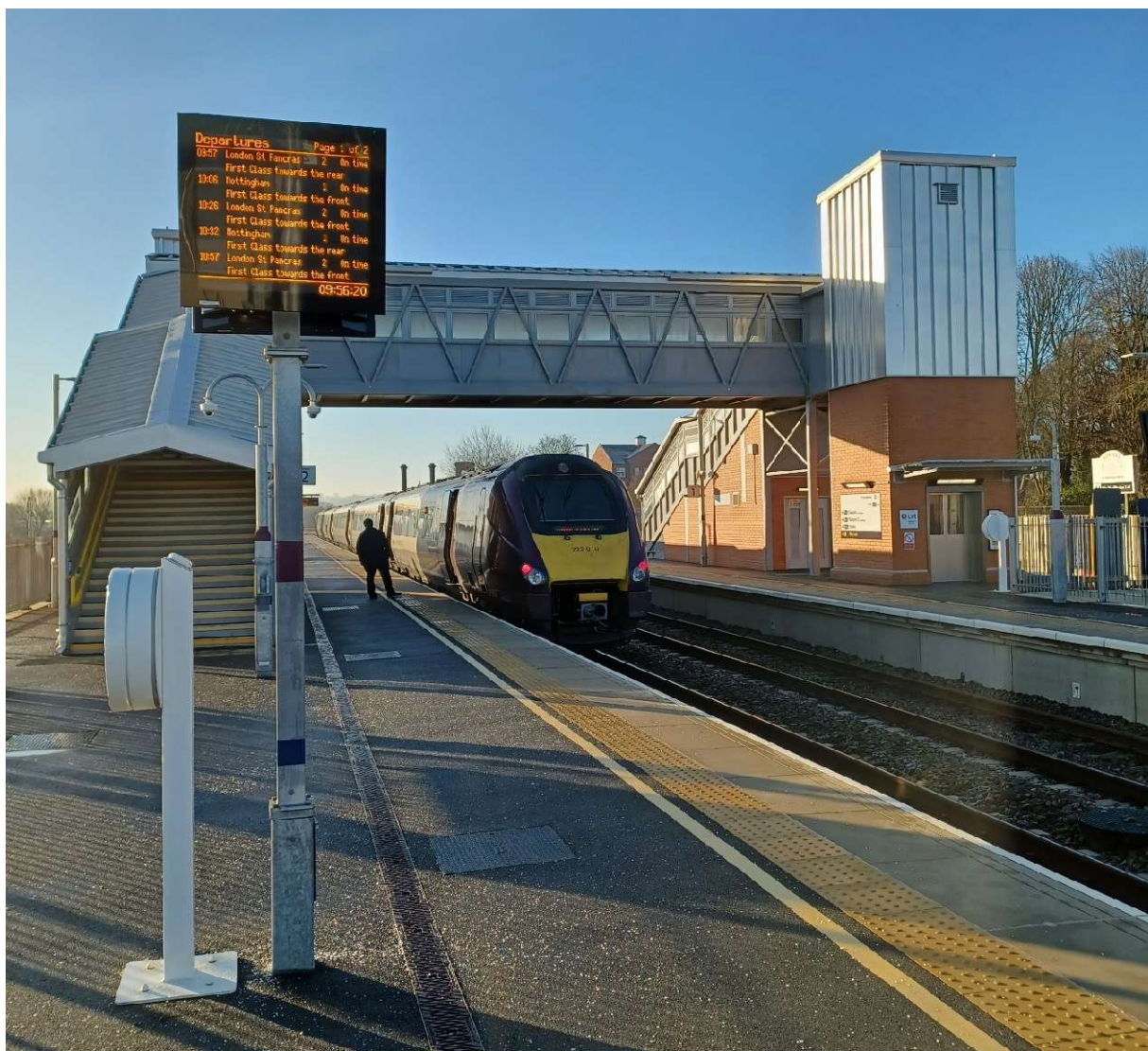
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### Modifications to Meridian trains

The Meridian train units, which form the great majority of our services, are now looking rather tired. Though now approaching the end of their service on the Intercity route, EMR have indicated that they may be given an interior refresh, including new seat covers.

One change that helped to ease some of the overcrowding was the reallocation of some carriages between Meridian units such that two of the 7-car sets each lost two cars, making them 5-cars each. The transferred vehicles then allowed each of the four 4-car sets to gain an extra vehicle. This almost standardises the Meridian fleet as 5-car units, with a few remaining as 7-cars. It caused an imbalance in the proportion of First Class accommodation on some units; this is to be addressed by some modification of interior layouts and declassifying of some First Class accommodation.



*All on time: A Class 222 Meridian stands at Market Harborough with the 09:57 to St Pancras on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2022. The small yellow rectangle on the coupling-head, below the main yellow end panel, denotes that this is the First Class end of the train. Couplings at the Standard Class end are black. Note also the absence of any electrification equipment at that time!*

*Picture: Steve Jones*

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### Resumption of double-unit train formations

As noted above, there was a resumption of double-unit train formations in the December 2021 timetable, with more in May 2022. However, staff shortages or train faults have sometimes resulted in only one portion of the train being available for public use. This has caused annoyance to passengers. General overcrowding has resulted in some Market Harborough passengers changing at Kettering for EMR Connect services to London; getting a seat being worth the slower journey. We regularly raise concern about overcrowding with EMR.

### ELECTRIFICATION

This has continued, with the masts and cantilevers steadily appearing around the station and throughout the line to Kettering in the winter and spring. By summer, most of the steelwork had been installed, with attention turning to the 'small fittings' that will actually carry the overhead wires. On 15<sup>th</sup> March 2022, senior managers from Network Rail and the electrification contractors SPL gathered at Market Harborough to observe three masts being placed on their piled foundations; one of these is shown in the right-hand picture below.



*On its way. The 09:57 to St Pancras arrives at Market Harborough on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2022. Electrification masts were installed the previous weekend just north of the station (and elsewhere). Much more has been installed since these pictures were taken.*



*Easy does it: An overhead line mast is lowered into position behind Platform 1 on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2022. Three were installed in not much more than an hour!*

*Pictures: Steve Jones*

Soon afterwards, it was confirmed that electrification would continue north, as far as Wigston South Junction in the next stage. This is now labelled 'K2W' (Kettering to Wigston) and we understand that installation of the overhead wires is being treated as one job rather than two. Development work is under way for the upgrade of the 1980s electrification and power supply south of Bedford for 125mph where track conditions allow. This is important if our services are to maintain current timings while running on electric power.



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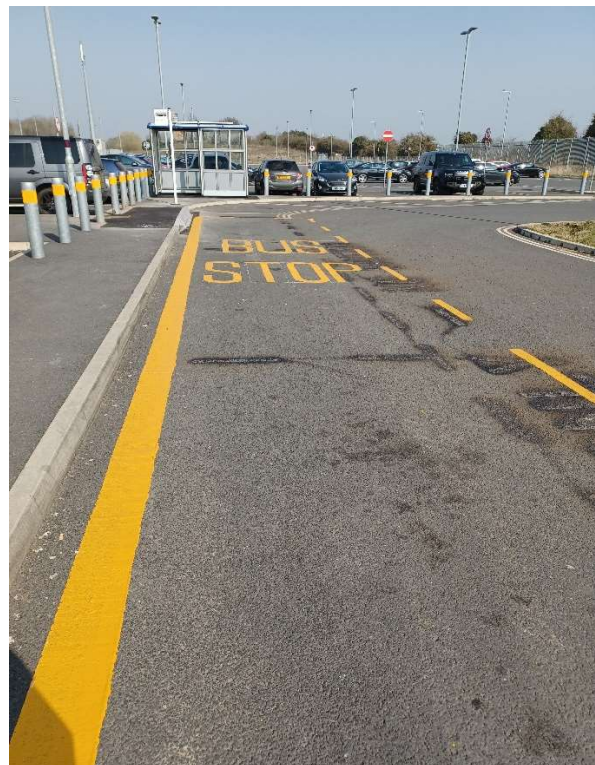
### MARKET HARBOROUGH STATION

Though the station was rebuilt at platform level in 2019, various residual works have taken place during the past year.

#### **Forecourt parking revised - again - March 2022**

There was further modification to the forecourt layout in March. The two former pay + display short-stay parking spaces are now marked for staff use only, with a small new pick-up and drop-off area where the Route 18 (Kettering) bus stop used to be on the approach road. The other bus stop, nearer the main building entrance, used by Route 44 (Foxton – Market Harborough – The Langtons – Fleckney) and rail replacement buses, was relocated to the main car park entrance, complete with a new shelter. Though an improvement in itself, it has resulted in the loss of three of only four short-stay 'drop-off' parking spaces at that side of the station.

Along with this, the entirely unnecessary pay + display car park ticket machine in the forecourt was removed. We had criticised this for years as it caused far more upset than it was worth, so its removal is a major improvement!



*Flying the flag for buses: the new bus stop at the car park entrance. This clears one source of traffic congestion from the station forecourt but does have the effect of reducing the short-stay parking at the car park side of the station to one drop-off space only! Pictures: Steve Jones*

#### **New toilet block on Platform 1**

Work started on this long-awaited project in mid-January, with foundations being laid prior to the floor deck being installed, followed by the steel framework for the walls in mid-April. By June, the building was structurally complete, and it was due to open on 30<sup>th</sup>. However, on 28<sup>th</sup> June, Network Rail announced that the opening was to be delayed by several weeks because

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of the need for adjustments to the toilet cubicle doors and the internal layout of the building. It finally opened on Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> July. It is also a pity that the opportunity was not taken to provide a canopy across the front of the building. When I asked about this, the reason given was that it would be difficult to maintain when the overhead wires are in place. Nonetheless,



*Now open. The new toilets and waiting room building opened for use on Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> July. It has been a long wait!*

*Picture: Steve Jones*

the new building is a great improvement. It also looks rather smart and gives a splash of colour to our otherwise somewhat grey station!

The new building enabled the second temporary toilet cabin to be removed from the forecourt in mid-September, revealing some former disabled parking spaces. These have entered general short stay use and go some way to helping with the woeful lack of such provision at the station. We continue to press for improvements, both with EMR and with Harborough District Council.

Along with the building works, the top end of the ramp from the booking office was rebuilt in late June to give a gentler angle of slope onto the platform, plus landscaping the immediate surroundings. Though much tidier than the previous arrangement, we are still concerned about the lack of weather protection for the ramp; this is limited to a small piece of canopy which sadly demonstrates absolutely no architectural sympathy with the Victorian structure it adjoins. It is also regretted that the restored luggage trolleys for Market Harborough in Bloom's planting scheme could not have been located in this area, which is central to the whole station. With a revised arrangement of railings, there would have been plenty of room.



*Nearly done. Finishing touches were being made to the remodelled top of the ramp from the booking office on 22<sup>nd</sup> July. Though some attention is being given to landscaping of the surroundings, it is a pity the opportunity was not taken to accommodate the old luggage trolleys being used for planting boxes for Market Harborough in Bloom. It is also a pity that, despite our submission to a related consultation in 2021, the treatment of the top of the ramp canopy could not have been a little more in keeping with the adjoining Victorian structure.*

*Picture: Steve Jones*



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*Left luggage: the two restored platform trolleys now doing duty as decorative planting boxes. They were put into position between the car park access ramp and the southbound waiting room on 10<sup>th</sup> October. They are maintained by Market Harborough in Bloom, who are also the adopters of the station.*

*Picture: Steve Jones*



To mark the completion of this work, Network Rail invited me to join the Leader and Deputy Leader of Harborough District Council for a tour of the station on 29<sup>th</sup> September. However, the two Councillors did not attend, so Network Rail had to make do with me! The 'tour' turned into a useful unscheduled discussion about the station and route improvements.

### **Station usage – figures to be published 24<sup>th</sup> November 2022**

Around the end of November each year, the Government's Office of Rail and Road (ORR) publishes annual data on rail passenger numbers. Prior to Covid, Market Harborough had seen steady growth and was heading towards a million passenger journeys a year. This plunged by 83% in 2020-21 because of Covid, to 150,866. We await the figures for 2021-22, which are due to be published on 24<sup>th</sup> November – the date of our AGM! However, a very rough indication of usage is the occupancy of the car park, which is often well over half of its 500-vehicle capacity.

### **Station adoption**

I applied to become an official 'station adopter' for our station and received my EMR safety briefing on 26<sup>th</sup> July. During this, I took the opportunity to pursue long-outstanding matters regarding community involvement with the station, including the Harborough in Bloom planters (Harborough in Bloom were also represented at the safety briefing, as they are the lead adopters for the station). Though not strictly a Harborough Rail Users duty, it does give the opportunity to liaise with the community rail and station adoption personnel at EMR as well as the other station adopters.

## **NORTHAMPTON LINE**

We maintain a watching brief on the proposals that emerge from time to time for reopening the line to Northampton. This would certainly be a great improvement to inter-regional connectivity, so it was disappointing to learn in March that Harborough District Council had decided not to take part in a study of the idea being led by the new West Northamptonshire Council.



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A public meeting was due to take place at the Methodist Church Hall on Northampton Road on 5<sup>th</sup> November, organised by the English Regional Transport Association and District Councillor for Little Bowden, Peter James. However, it was cancelled at short notice and has been rescheduled for next March.

### MEETINGS WITH EMR

HRU's constitution requires at least one meeting per annum with the train operator.

#### Meeting with EMR's Stakeholder Manager – 13<sup>th</sup> June 2022

At EMR's invitation, I met with Laura Etheridge, their Stakeholder Manager, in Market Harborough on 13<sup>th</sup> June. This was for a general catch-up; I am aware that similar meetings were being held with other user groups and similar organisations throughout the EMR area. We discussed a wide range of topics, including the station and its lack of adequate short-stay parking; rolling stock and overcrowding; temporary timetables during disruption; the continuing need for an earlier first train northbound on Sundays; electrification; and handling of unplanned disruption. As ever, this was a cordial and candid meeting. I have also requested a meeting involving the whole HRU Committee, which was agreed but is yet to be arranged.

### OTHER

#### Rockingham Road Bridge - February 2022

We were approached about the considerable leakage of rainwater through the brickwork of the arch over Rockingham Road and we referred this to Network Rail. They responded very swiftly, inspecting the bridge and confirming that the problem has been known about for some years. They already had repairs planned for the drainage system; these were done in early June and the number of men and vans attending suggested it was quite a thorough job. Completely re-sealing the bridge deck would be a major and disruptive exercise, and Network Rail are satisfied that the bridge is structurally sufficient for the load it carries. However, in October, the bridge was again leaking rainwater through its brickwork...

*Bridging the gaps: Network Rail contractors attending to the drainage system on Rockingham Road bridge, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2022. Though Network Rail have been monitoring the condition of the bridge, and are satisfied that it is fully safe, this work followed representations made by HRU about the leaking of rainwater through the brickwork, and the regular large puddle in the road beneath.*

*Picture: Steve Jones*



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### Market Harborough Town Centre Masterplan and Transport Action Group (MHTAG)

I was invited to attend a presentation on 13<sup>th</sup> April by Harborough District Council on their Town Centre Masterplan proposals. This project was delayed by Covid, but it includes proposals to improve the area around the station and the Rockingham Road bridge and the various walking, cycling and vehicle routes between the station and the town centre. It is good stuff, and the station is clearly seen as a gateway into the town for visitors and residents alike. One spin-off from this was meeting a representative of the Market Harborough Transport Action Group, which is part of the Sustainable Harborough Community. Now styled Harborough Transport Action, it campaigns for better active travel (walking, cycling) and public transport provision in and around the town. The station and train service are clearly relevant here. I attended their inaugural meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> May and there was a fair degree of interest in the station, the rail service, and rail generally, including freight. Several meetings have been held since and rail matters are a regular feature of the agenda.

### CONCLUSIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The past year has been one of contrasts. The railway has been emerging well from the Covid pandemic, with overcrowded trains again becoming a regular feature. Investment in the station and the line has continued, and Market Harborough station looks somewhat different from how it looked even only a year ago. On the other hand, the year has been beset by a volley of industrial disputes and we call upon all parties, including the Government, to bring about a swift and lasting resolution. Only then can the railway really build itself back better after the pandemic.

Again, we in HRU have made our voice heard on the various matters that affect our station and train service. As in previous years, 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.

Finally, I am as always grateful for all the help and support given by the HRU Committee through the year.

**Steve Jones**

**Chair**

**Harborough Rail Users**

**24<sup>th</sup> November 2022**

<https://www.harborough-rail.org.uk/>  
[feedback@harborough-rail.co.uk](mailto:feedback@harborough-rail.co.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.*

*All pictures © Steve Jones.*