

HARBOROUGH RAIL USERS

Annual General Meeting 26th November 2025

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 2025. At the time of writing, we eagerly anticipate the delayed introduction of the first of the new Class 810 Aurora bi-mode trains, not least to augment our depleted rolling stock fleet.



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 18th November 2024, the Committee met:

- On 10th March 2025, at the Red Cow pub, to discuss Sunday train services, current topics affecting the station and its environs, and HRU's liaison with other relevant passenger representative groups including TravelWatch.
- On 15th September 2025, at the Red Cow pub. Topics included preparations for the AGM, aspects of the train service, rail replacement buses, and the forthcoming changes in the train fleet.

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

THE PAST YEAR

At our AGM in 2024, we identified our main campaign topics for the forthcoming year. Set out below are developments and HRU's activities regarding each of these in turn. This is followed by other relevant topics, plus HRU's affiliations with other organisations.

1. TRAIN SERVICES, CONNECTIVITY AND FARES

New timetable: 15th December 2024

The timetable from December 2024 saw only minor adjustments to train services on weekdays and Saturdays, but major changes on Sundays. As foreseen in last year's report, it was mostly good news, with many trains on Sunday mornings significantly accelerated between Market Harborough and St Pancras, by as much as 27 minutes. This was enabled by improved track access south of Bedford on Sunday mornings. However, we lost our first two trains to London: the 07:43 and the 08:10. Admittedly, our first train in the new timetable, the 08:43, has faster timings and is due to arrive at St Pancras at 09:50, only 34 minutes later than the previous first arrival. However, it is still a later start, and it also means a loss of early connections to

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intermediate stations south of Kettering. For example, our first arrival time at Luton Airport Parkway is now 09:27; it used to be 08:37. Moreover, the first two trains have not proven to be reliable runners; since the beginning of September at least, neither has arrived on time into St Pancras. We have taken this up with EMR.

December 2024 saw a modest improvement northbound, with the first train at 10:13 to Nottingham being 16 minutes earlier than before. Welcome though this is, we still seek further improvement.

New timetable: 18th May 2025

There was almost no change to our train service.

New timetable 15th December 2025: later last trains back from London

For most of the service, the December 2025 timetable sees only minor change; some trains are retimed by the odd minute here and there.

We have continued to press for a later last train back from St Pancras on weekdays and Saturdays than the present 22:35 (22:32 Saturdays), which are too early for an evening out in London. It was pleasing to see our MP, Neil O'Brien, raise this in the House of Commons on 21st November 2024 in a debate about Midland Main Line electrification. Two later trains do run on weekdays, leaving St Pancras at 23:04 and 23:35, but they are scheduled to run via Corby because of the electrification work on our line. In addition, there is a need to maintain traincrew route knowledge of the diversionary route via Corby and Manton Junction.

The good news is that from 15th December 2025 there will be later trains, departing St Pancras at 23:00 on Sundays (as now) and 23:35 on weekdays, though not Saturdays. The journey is not fast, but at least there is a later train. EMR do caution, however, that one week in six they will run via Corby and Manton for crew route knowledge reasons. When this happens, a replacement bus will be provided from Kettering to Market Harborough, maintaining the link.

Line blockade: 21st – 30th December 2024

There was a ten-day blockade of the line over the Christmas period in 2024, for three major engineering projects: installing a bridge under the line for the rail connection to the new Radlett Rail Freight Interchange; replacement of Agar Grove bridge near Kentish Town; and the 'OLE 125' upgrade of the 1980s electrification equipment south of Bedford. This last is important in enabling our new Aurora trains to run at 125mph where track conditions allow south of Bedford. Had this not been done, they would either have to run on diesel to maintain schedules or run electrically at a maximum of 100mph. Neither option would have been ideal.

Connections

We have raised the need for improvements to the reliability and management of connections with the EMR Connect service at Kettering for those travelling to and from Wellingborough and all the other intermediate stations including Luton Airport Parkway. We also continue to seek better and more reliable connections at Leicester for Birmingham and Sheffield.

Rail replacement buses

Over the years, we have become well used to buses replacing trains during weekend engineering work. In the main, this works well, and buses are better coordinated at the main car park entrance rather than the forecourt. However, during engineering work near East Midlands Parkway over two recent weekends, in October and November, the bus

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arrangements have been less than ideal. Though we have trains as far as Leicester, the line has then been closed between there and Nottingham. The replacement buses have called at several or all intermediate stations, taking an hour and 43 minutes (fast) or over two hours (all stations). Although not a specific Market Harborough problem, we queried with EMR the lack of non-stop connecting buses between Leicester and Nottingham, to reduce the excessive journey times. EMR report that there is not the demand for such buses.

Future timetables

The Intercity timetable will probably be reviewed following the introduction of the new Aurora trains and any acceleration they may bring. Moreover, Bedford is likely to become a significant interchange in future with the opening of East West Rail between Oxford and Cambridge, plus the planned Universal Studios theme park nearby.

EMR held stakeholder workshops earlier in the year as they prepared the significant recast of their Regional services for the December 2025 timetable. They have indicated they may do something similar for Intercity services once the Aurora fleet is in place. We would certainly want to take part.

Fares

We remain concerned about the relatively high fares charged from Market Harborough station and are aware of people using other stations, especially Northampton, where fares to London can be significantly lower. Lack of competition between operators has been cited as a factor. However, pending wider reform of the rail industry and the fares structure, we do not see much likelihood of this changing.

2. ROLLING STOCK

On 3rd April 2025, Network Rail reported that the Government's Office of Rail and Road (ORR) had issued the formal Authorisation to Place into Service (APIS) for the Kettering to Wigston electrification, including the new feeder substation at Braybrooke. This means the electrification through Market Harborough is officially safe and ready to use for electric trains. Moreover, it was delivered on time and under budget.

However, the trains to run on it are late! EMR has ordered 33 new 5-car Aurora Class 810 bi-mode (diesel + electric) train units from Hitachi. Testing identified problems with these that have needed major rectification, causing delays in delivery. However, at least three have now been accepted into EMR's fleet and they regularly come through Market Harborough on test and for crew training. Having stated that it would be 2026 before any enter service, EMR have recently indicated that the first will be carrying passengers by the end of 2025. As well as increased capacity, the new trains promise better phone signal and wi-fi.

Their introduction cannot come too soon. Our diesel fleet has been steadily reducing since the withdrawal of the much-loved InterCity 125 High Speed Trains, and then the four stop-gap Class 180 diesel units. Not only that, but the mainstay of the present fleet, the 27 Class 222 Meridian units, are also now being depleted. At the time of writing, the first of five units has already gone, to be refurbished for transfer to open-access operator Lumo for their expansion of services. EMR have announced that some services will be reduced from ten carriages to five and that seat reservations will be curtailed as they seek to maintain as good a service as possible in the interim.

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Relevant also to rolling stock deployment is the Government's decision in July to 'pause' electrification of the rest of the line beyond Wigston to Nottingham and Sheffield. Though the new bi-mode trains, being both diesel and electric, can run on non-electrified track, the Government's decision has caused widespread dismay. Not only would electrification have allowed the new Auroras to perform to their best advantage, but it would also have enabled decarbonisation of other routes through the use of electric + battery hybrid trains in future. At least Market Harborough is on the right side of the electrification boundary!



New dawn. A Class 810 Aurora train passes through Market Harborough on electric power on 30th September 2025. Several of these have now been accepted into EMR's fleet and crew training is under way.

3. MARKET HARBOROUGH STATION

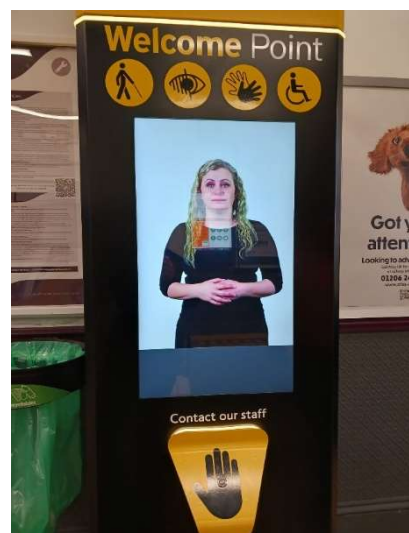
Station facilities - January 2025 Welcome Point



In late January, a large black and yellow box resembling one of those old AA phone-boxes appeared in the booking hall, next to Butterwicks' café entrance. This was a Welcome Point, aimed at enabling disabled people who need assistance to alert staff to their arrival at the station should the booking office be unstaffed. It was a trial, and followed concerns that disabled passengers may not easily be able to find staff who can, for example, direct them to the platforms or help them board the train.

Clearly designed with the partially sighted in mind, it was a well-intentioned initiative. However, it was not interactive, in that staff

elsewhere on the station could not communicate remotely with the passenger. Staff also commented that the device became a good source of sport to the livelier elements of society during the later part of Saturday evenings!



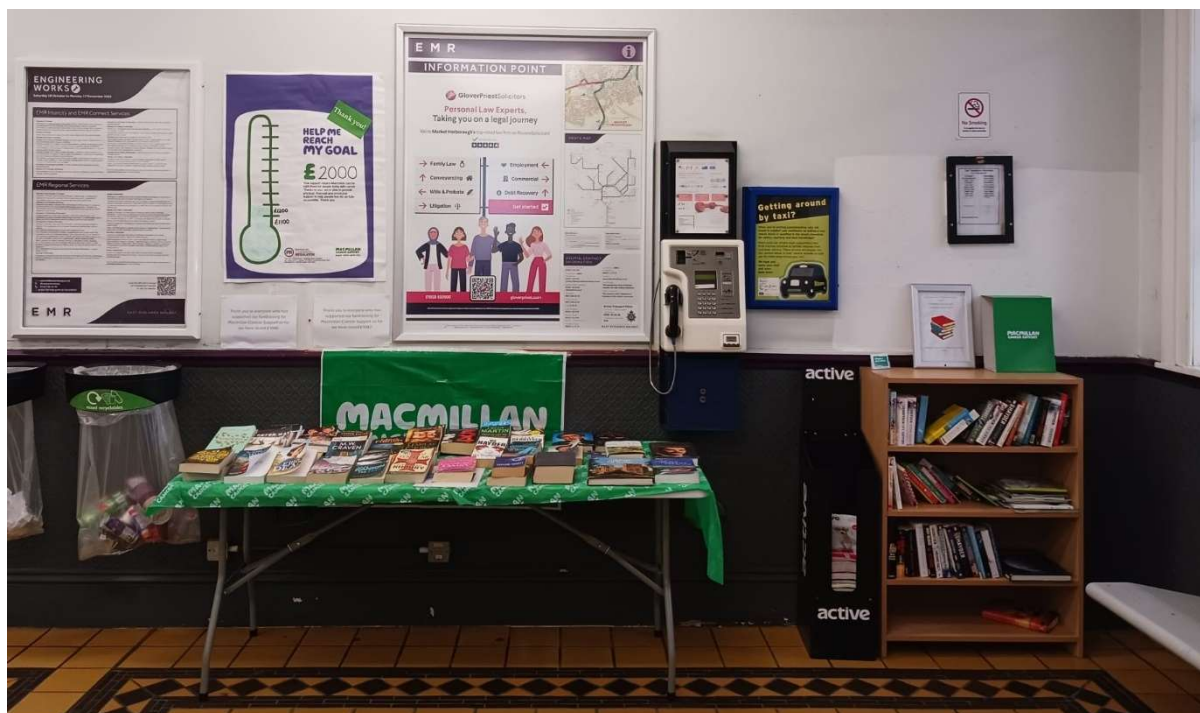
You're welcome! The new Welcome Point kiosk in the booking hall on 22nd January 2025. Placing a hand where indicated alerted the station staff to the passenger's arrival, so that staff could attend and provide any necessary assistance. The screen also gave information and advice in sign language. It was later removed, however.

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The Welcome Point disappeared after a few weeks, however, so maybe the trial was not successful. In its place, a second-hand book stall has appeared, run by the station staff in aid of Macmillan Cancer Relief. This is a very worthy initiative and deserves support.



Booking hall book stall. Fundraising for Macmillan, 7th November 2025.

Station café closes

Back in June 2023, we were very pleased to see local firm Butterwicks reopen the café unit in the booking hall. The previous one had closed during the Covid pandemic. We were therefore dismayed by its sudden closure on Monday 22nd September, when Butterwicks went into voluntary liquidation. We are hopeful that a new occupant will soon be found.

Bus interchange

The County Council undertook a County-wide review of its supported bus services in late 2024 and early 2025. Phase 2 of the review covered the rural routes in Harborough District, and 17th March saw significant changes. Route 44, Foxton – Market Harborough – Fleckney, which was the only one serving the station, via the bus stop at the car park entrance, was altered to become the LC4, Market Harborough – Foxton – Fleckney. It no longer serves the station. Conversely, route LC10, which replaces the 58 between Market Harborough and Lutterworth, now does call at the station on its westbound journeys. Moreover, FoxConnect demand-responsive minibus services were introduced linking several zones of villages with Market Harborough; these all call at the station if advance bookings request them to do so.

The town routes (30, 33A/B/C), none of which called at the station), fell into Phase 3 of the review. They were altered on 2nd June 2025, to be replaced by four new town loops, HC1/2/3/4. All of these except HC4, Southern Estate, call at the station.

Harborough Rail Users is represented on the Harborough Transport Action (HTA) group, part of the Sustainable Harborough Community. HTA has campaigned extensively for improvements to the local buses, including interchange with the trains.

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Platform reconstruction – June 2025

Late June saw the platforms at Market Harborough station substantially rebuilt during the four weekends 21st – 22nd June to 12th – 13th July. The infill material between the front and back platform walls had failed, leading to some unevenness and surface cracking. It was dug out and replaced, at no cost to the railway as the platforms are only six years old. Luckily, the line was already closed at weekends for track engineering work at Wigston, so advantage of that was taken for the platform work.

Car park barriers to be replaced by ANPR

On 6th October, EMR announced that many of their station car parks are converting to Automatic Number Plate Recognition technology, ANPR. The equipment is due to be installed at Market Harborough on 24th November and go live a few days later. ANPR uses cameras to capture and recognise vehicle registration numbers, helping to manage car park access more efficiently and securely. Parking will be charged daily, payable on entry. Season tickets will still be available, though direct from the operator, APCOA.

We have, however, asked numerous questions about how it will operate. Among these are the arrangements for passengers who plan to be away for several days, leaving their cars in



the car park until they return, and whether season-ticket holders can use different cars on different days under one season ticket. (In both cases, the facility is there.) We intend to keep an eye on how this all works.

We are pleased to see that disabled blue badge holders will be able to park free of charge (subject to registering their badge on the system) and that there will be 30 minutes' grace before payment is required, for short-stay parking.

Removing the barriers. These are due to be replaced by ANPR technology in late 2025.

Cycle Parking

Tragically, the Cycle Hub was broken into again in early December. This had happened before, in early June 2024, and is believed to be the work of determined criminals rather than opportunists. Again, the door was damaged and again temporarily replaced with a plywood door. This time, however, the door was kept locked by the station staff, who opened it when needed for users. A replacement door was in place in January.



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Station adoption

Though not directly an HRU function, I am one of the ‘station adopters’ along with numerous others from the Market Harborough in Bloom Volunteers, MHiBV. Much has been done to enhance the station with flower boxes including those on the platform railings.

On 28th March, we met Kaye Robinson, our new EMR Community Engagement Manager. We had a walk around the station, looking at existing and proposed additional planting. Sadly, the planned ‘Station Gateway’ enhancement to planting and signage around the station forecourt under the Government’s Prosperity Fund (via Harborough District Council) has been abandoned. The funding was withdrawn following a change in Government policy.

We also looked at the ‘stationmaster’s garden’, the rough patch of ground at the foot of the car park access road, where there is a desire to create a small park. We still await a response from EMR regarding land ownership and access, a site survey and possible funding sources for an improvement scheme.

Separately, the County Council is planning some footway and cycle-path improvements along the ‘Rockingham Road corridor’, which passes the station, but this does not include landscaping.

During the course of the year, a significant project has been to develop the planting behind Platform 2. The blue plastic planting boxes have been supplemented by specially constructed wooden boxes and a boundary made of sleepers. This has greatly tidied up the increasingly weed-strewn gravel area between the platform and the emergency escape path. EMR and Network Rail staff helped with this during a volunteer ‘community action day’ on 1st October 2025.

Market Harborough in Bloom station adopters working on the planters and tidying up the gravel area behind Platform 2 on 1st September 2025. This was followed up by a rail industry ‘community action day’ a month later.



Station usage

The Government’s Office of Rail and Road publishes annual statistics including estimates of station usage. These are defined as ‘entrances and exits’ and are derived from ticket sales (‘entrance’ at origin station, ‘exit’ at destination). For the reporting year April 2023 to March 2024, these figures were released on 21st November 2024. The total for Market Harborough in the year was 882,598, which was a 15.7% increase on 2022-23’s total of 762,792. Market Harborough is thus the 556th busiest station on the national network, out of a total of 2,585 stations. This is getting back towards the pre-Covid peak of 937,484 in 2019-20. The main destination or origin for journeys from or to Market Harborough was London, with 439,770 journeys, or 49.8% of the total. Journeys made with season tickets totalled 147,122 in 2023-24 (16.7% of the total), less than half of the 311,164 in 2019-20 (33.2%). Thus, though total journeys have almost recovered, the numbers commuting daily remain well down, illustrating the changed working patterns since the Covid pandemic.

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At the time of writing, we await imminent publication of the figures for 2024-25. Experience of trains now often being overcrowded points to continued recovery and growth – though also a shrinking fleet. How long before Market Harborough has over a million passengers a year?!

Other station facilities

We continue to seek more shelter on the platforms plus covered cycle parking for occasional users for whom joining the cycle hub scheme is not justified. However, there are no indications that either is planned.

OTHER

Northampton Line – Possible Reopening

Reopening of the line to Northampton is proposed from time to time. It is promoted by the N2MH campaign group, and there was a public meeting in Market Harborough on 12th April 2025. Harborough MP Neil O'Brien appeared in the *Harborough Mail* in March, proudly displaying his N2MH tee-shirt. However, we understand there is no official interest in the idea at present.

Though not an active campaign for HRU, we support the idea in principle. We shall continue to maintain a watching brief.

Flying Scotsman – Rail200 Special

2025 marks the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Stockton & Darlington Railway, regarded as the birth of the modern railway. Many events took place across the country, including 'The Greatest Gathering' of historic and modern rail vehicles at Alstom's carriage works in Derby in early August. As part of that, on Saturday 2nd August, legendary locomotive *Flying Scotsman* hauled a special train through Market Harborough, on its way to Derby.



National treasure. On 2nd August 2025, LNER locomotive Flying Scotsman hustles its special train through Market Harborough on its way to 'The Greatest Gathering' Rail200 event in Derby.

Photo: Mick Riddett.

Meetings with EMR: Stakeholder Conference: 31st January 2025

I attended this annual conference, held at Trent Bridge Cricket Ground in Nottingham. The morning consisted of presentations by representatives of EMR, the Department for Transport, Network Rail, and the Great British Railways Transition Team. They gave updates on EMR, including challenges facing the business, such as fleet unreliability; trespass including fatalities; and weather. On the other hand, progress was continuing with the electrification to

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Wigston plus modification of depots for the new fleet; other major engineering work has been completed successfully and on time; and revenue has been growing. Work continues on preparations for the new structure of the rail industry.

Afternoon group workshop sessions looked at the EMR train fleet refurbishment, service performance, the significant changes in EMR's Regional timetables from December 2025, and crime and security. As ever, the event was a good opportunity to meet and compare notes with colleagues from other rail user and station friends' groups and Community Rail Partnerships, as well as rail industry contacts.

We have not had other specific meetings with EMR over the past year, but contact has been regular by email and phone. I am due to meet EMR on 4th December in my Railfuture role and will seek to raise matters of interest to HRU.

OTHER ORGANISATIONS TO WHICH HRU IS AFFILIATED

Harborough Transport Action (HTA)

I have continued to represent HRU in this group, which is part of the Sustainable Harborough Community, a collaboration of environmental groups and concerned individuals in the town. Transport has significant environmental effects; public transport, including rail, is part of the solution. A focus of the group's work has been the County Council's review of bus services, including seeking better bus links with the station. Related to that is my involvement on behalf of HTA and HRU in the County Council's Passenger Transport Users Group and 'Enhanced Partnership' Forum; the partnership being between the County and the transport operators.

TravelWatch East Midlands (TWEM)

I am the HRU rep on TWEM, which is a consultative forum and watchdog body for users of all modes of transport in the East Midlands. Having not met for some time, TWEM was re-established at a meeting in Nottingham on 26th February, though has seen little activity since.

Railfuture

HRU is a group member of Railfuture, the UK's leading independent national rail campaign organisation. Railfuture's aims can be summarised as 'better services on a bigger railway'. Membership brings contact with other user groups and campaign organisations, access to Railfuture events, plus resources such as a paid-up Zoom licence for online meetings.

CONCLUSIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The past year has seen the full completion of electrification through Market Harborough and the first of our new trains is due to enter service imminently. The forthcoming reinstatement of our later last train from London is a very satisfying culmination of our campaign efforts. There is also greater integration of local bus services with the station.

The past year has also set the scene for some major changes to come. By next year's AGM, the full new fleet should have entered service. We await the effect this has on overcrowding; a major uplift in capacity is promised. We also await operating experience of the new trains, which will lead to a review of the running times and therefore the timetable. That may also lead to alterations in the service structure; not in the next year but the foundations may be

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laid. For example, questions remain whether Bedford and Luton Airport Parkway may gain more Intercity calls, given their present and future interchange status.

The core term of the National Rail Contract with EMR, which replaced the previous franchise, is due to end in October 2026. Unless the option to extend it to 2030 is exercised, that will almost certainly mean EMR is nationalised, to join the DfT Operator organisation. Meanwhile, Great British Railways will continue to evolve, as the related legislation goes through Parliament and reintegration of the national railway develops.

More locally, we shall continue in our efforts to promote the interests of Market Harborough's rail users. We still need to pursue an earlier start of service, in both directions, on Sundays. We shall keep an eye on how the new car parking arrangements work.

We have continued – and shall continue – our links with other local community and transport groups, seeking to represent local rail users but doing so as part of a bigger coalition of interests.

As in past years, I appreciate the willingness of EMR, Network Rail and others to engage in discussions, and the support of the local MP and Councillors as we continue to seek the best for all rail users in our growing town.

Finally, I am very grateful for all the help and support given by the HRU Committee.

Steve Jones

Chair, Harborough Rail Users

Report to AGM 26th November 2025

<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.



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