

MARKET HARBOROUGH'S 'MAIN LINE' TRAIN SERVICE

For decades up to the 1950s Market Harborough had only about six daily through trains to St Pancras, with a typical journey time of around 2 hours, although a few additional slower connections were available by changing at Kettering or Bedford. Irregular local trains enhanced the service to stations to Bedford, Leicester and Nottingham.

With the advent of reliable diesel locomotives (the much loved 'Peaks', later Class 45) timings improved, and following the vogue for clock-face timetables the main line service was revolutionised from April 1966, with hourly trains giving a journey time of around 95 minutes to St Pancras. The local trains disappeared on the closure of the remaining intermediate stations, including Kibworth and Desborough, in 1968. A further speed-up came with the introduction of High Speed Trains (HSTs) in 1982, almost all services being worked by these stylish, comfortable trains from May 1983. Commuting to London for those working office hours became practicable for the first time, and grew rapidly from the early 1980s.

Unfortunately, economies in the late 1970s led to gaps of 90-120 minutes in the off-peak service at Market Harborough. On privatisation of the railways the service through Harborough was franchised to Midland Mainline, part of the National Express Group, from April 1996. This was one of the few original rail franchises to propose dramatic service enhancements, and in May 1999 the company doubled the number of trains on the route, Harborough gaining a regular half-hourly service plus additional trains at peak times. The regular stopping service was provided by new Class 170 Turbostar 2-car diesel trains, with some peak hour 4-car formations. These were soon overwhelmed by the growth in passenger numbers, despite some sets being augmented to 3-cars, and were replaced from 2004 by 4-car Class 222 'Meridians' which coupled as 8-cars in the peak.



A 2-car Class 170 Turbostar at Leicester on 16th May 2018. It is awaiting departure on a service to Birmingham with its present operator, CrossCountry, but spent its formative years with operator Midland Mainline on services via Market Harborough to St Pancras.

From November 2007 the passenger franchise passed to Stagecoach Group company East Midlands Trains, who immediately provided a badly needed increase in car park capacity from 200 to 300 spaces. The Government had proposed to let the new franchise with no requirement to continue a half-hourly service at Market Harborough, and indeed proposed a service pattern with only hourly stops, but following an intensive campaign led by Harborough Rail Users there was a commitment to twice-hourly trains.

The new timetable from December 2008 therefore retained two trains per hour each way, one a semi-fast service of 'Meridians' making four stops to St Pancras and the other, worked by HSTs, running non-stop from Market Harborough in about one hour. The HSTs, although retaining dated features such as manual doors, have been re-engined and refurbished and they soldier on! To cater for continuing passenger growth at intermediate stations the 'Meridian' fleet was re-jigged to provide mostly 5-car sets, coupling as 9 or 10-cars at peak times. Weekday off-peak trains northwards run to Nottingham, but good cross-platform connections are available at Leicester to Derby and Sheffield.



Substituting for an HST, a 4-car Meridian train departs Market Harborough on the 11:15 to Nottingham on 17th October 2018.

From December 2013 there were further improvements following upgrading of parts of the route to permit a maximum speed of 125 rather than 110 mph. The standard non-stop journey time to St Pancras became 61 minutes, and 54 minutes coming back. Not bad for 83 miles!

Sunday trains also became half-hourly, but all made intermediate stops to London. (A couple of non-stop London services were later added on Sunday afternoons.) The Sunday service was speeded up in December 2012 but is inevitably affected from time to time by engineering work. Most autumns and winters see periods when Sunday trains are diverted through Corby, with bus connections between Kettering, Market Harborough and Leicester.

Train diversions via Corby and replacement buses from Market Harborough also happened during the long-awaited six-day 'blockade' between 28th May and 2nd June 2019 while the station was completely rebuilt at track and platform level. This rebuild saw the sub-standard old platforms and sinuous track alignment replaced by new straighter track and, when finished later in 2019, full-length straight platforms plus accessibility improvements. This scheme, originally planned in the late 1970s but postponed for decades because of funding shortages, is part of the upgrade of the Midland Main Line, allowing more capacity and faster journeys. By the end of 2019, there will also be an extension to the new car park to give it a total of 500 spaces.



An HST arrives at Market Harborough for a non-stop afternoon service to St Pancras on 24th May 2019, just days before the old platforms were demolished. Note the S-bend within the length of the train!

Since 1996, passenger numbers for Market Harborough have nearly trebled to just under 900,000 per year (2017-18), travel to London has grown substantially and commuting to Leicester has revived. The service has strong local support but, in addition, passengers from a wide area use Harborough as their nearest convenient railhead. The station has effectively become 'South Leicestershire Parkway'!

Electrification, intended to be completed by 2018-19, was agreed and funded, and work to raise bridges to provide clearance for the wires got under way. Amid much controversy, it was later cancelled other than for the Corby service. However, as the power supply for that is from a National Grid substation to be built at Braybrooke, just outside Market Harborough, a provisional decision was later taken to extend the electrification 'the last mile' into Market Harborough. Design work on this is under way, with final decisions due soon, at the time of writing.

We now await the hand-over from East Midlands Trains to Abellio East Midlands Railway (EMR), due on 18th August 2019. A requirement of the new franchise is a

completely new fleet of bi-mode (electric and, probably, diesel) trains to replace both the HSTs and the Meridians. They are due to enter full service in 2023.

The future of our train service seems assured, but Harborough Rail Users will continue to work to ensure the best possible service for local travellers.

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