

The Fenman

Newsletter of the Fen Line Users Association

www.flua.org.uk

fenman@flua.org.uk

Issue 1/2010

The Fenman has been used, both officially and unofficially, as a train name ever since 1949.

FLUA is delighted that FCC unit no **365518** is now named **The Fenman** in memory of former Vice-Chairman, the late **David Forgan**. We are equally delighted that FCC unit **365527** - the one featured on our logo - is called **Robert Stripe, Passengers' Champion**.

“Through caverns measureless to man, down to a sunless sea.” The winter weather, if not quite on the scale of Coleridge’s caves of ice, has been enough to put a dent in our rail service recently. Nothing compared to 1947 or 1963, the old-timers will say, but they didn’t have the technology of today to contend with back then! Ironic, isn’t it, that the steam age took blizzards in its stride, whereas today it takes only a moderate amount of snow to grab the railway where it hurts, **right in the vitals?**

Of course, though the romance may have warmed the heart, the frequency of steam age trains on the Fen Line wasn’t up to much and journey times were, well, unmentionable! Commuter line it most certainly was not.

And there’s the rub. We call, with demonstrable justification, for more and longer trains. Squeezing more capacity out of the system requires state of the art technology, on the tracks and on the trains. Yet, the very same technology is sensitive to extremes of temperature, as we’ve just seen.

Climate change scientists say that the weather is likely to become ever more variable. If so, surely extremes of cold – and heat - need to be factored in. There are parts of the world that experience both and can share their knowledge.

Perhaps communication with foreign parts is required. And talking of communication, make sure to tell the passengers what’s happening – a whiteout mustn’t be the reason for a communications blackout.

Music loud and long – page 2.

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Points and signals

Chamber of Trade Director *Paul Kunes* tells us Lynn station car park **“completely full”** on 18 February - **“first time I have seen that.”**

Loud calls for the FCC franchise to be scrapped from *Thameslink* route customers. The next contractual breakpoint is 31 March.

30 bikes at Ely taped off in the big clear up.

FCC and DfT are negotiating for extra trains from December. We repeat our call for the **0526 Ely-Kings Cross** to start from Lynn and also ask for 2045 and 2315 trains back.

Would 2325 be better than 2315? Tell us!

125 mph ‘Super Expresses’ for Fen Line? Government’s East Coast Franchise consultation says SETs to replace “some” FCC trains from 2015/16.

See page 28, *Modern Railways*, March 2010.

THE FEN LINE



USERS ASSOCIATION

Contacting FLUA

Colin Sampson, Chairman

Tel: (01366) 388003

or reach FLUA on:

e-mail: fluasecretary@flua.org.uk

Andy Tyler, Secretary

Flat 4, 36 Nelson Street

KING’S LYNN, Norfolk, PE30 5DY

Tel: 07803 459 043

John Legg, Treasurer

Robert Stripe, Vice-Chairman

Music loud and long

THE SITUATION can change rapidly and often does. We understand that, but we need to know what's going on and what's being done about it; we need to be informed.

Americans know 'FCC' as the 'Federal Communications Commission,' not something that readily springs to mind here! For, despite the communications technology revolution, train companies so often fail to go that last mile.

There are things we can do to help ourselves – TrainTracker (0871 200 49 50), TrainTracker Text, SMS travel alerts, Vista Gadget, National Rail Enquiries (08457 48 49 50), Ceefax 433, etc. But it shouldn't be all down to us.

Tell us what you know. Tell us it might have to change, tell us what's being done. Tell us!

Bridge over troubled water

Network Rail has submitted revised designs for its proposed footbridge at Downham Market.

The revisions take on board points made by the heritage lobby. NR envisages the bridge, which has provision for the later inclusion of lifts, replacing the barrow crossing.

If it is to be built, then we think there should be some measure of gain for station users.

In our comments to the Borough Council of KL&WN, we asked for steps from platform 1 to provide a short cut directly into the car park.

We also asked for additional parking spaces on the platform 2 side – the footbridge would necessitate the shortening of the siding there.

Finally, we asked for a planning condition that stipulates the barrow crossing is not to be fenced off until alternative step-free access between platforms is provided within the station.

Another place

THERE'S been a tidy up at Cambridge; NXEA asked passengers what they wanted at the station and took action based on that. So there's been a refurbishment of the toilets with a more active cleaning regime, the Duty Manager's Office has been relocated to the heart of the station to make staff more accessible, and there's a big clear up of abandoned cycles under way,

Winter warmers

Many fares and car park charges have been frozen. Additionally, FCC has made the experimental Super Off-peak discounted ticket to London a permanent offer.

At least 20% off for weekend travel – Railcards and Groupsave can be used for more discount.

<http://www.firstcapitalconnect.co.uk/Main.php?iCmsPageId=474>

Did you say crisis?

Stewart Kidd ruminates about the trials of the irregular commuter.

I used to be a *real* commuter and from 1988 to 1998 travelled to King's Cross. In the pre-electric days I used to drive from Wilburton to Huntingdon - try *that* today but allow an hour at peak times! The 065x was my preferred train and pre 1994 rarely carried more than 20/30 passengers.

Now as a busy consultant, advising companies on loss prevention problems, I travel to London 9/10 times per month but also use Ely to get to Stansted (Note to Cross County Trains: could we have a later evening return train?). I also travel to Birmingham, Manchester and intermediate stations as well as the East Coast to Leeds, Newcastle and Edinburgh.

Many of my colleagues are amazed at how many places I can get to from Ely.

The changes I've witnessed have affected the way I work. Overcrowding, particularly homebound, means that I travel first class and, as I often go in late, I've had to invest in a station parking space – fortunately, I can bill clients with my travel costs!

Like all Ely commuters, improvements which I'd like to see are faster peak hour services – it surely should be possible for at least one of the 07xx and 08xx trains to run non-stop from Cambridge. I find it perverse that an already standing-room only train should call at Royston or Baldock or Letchworth.

Surely it would be easier to run shuttles from Royston to Hitchin or Stevenage and run a couple of extra fast trains from there. I also miss not stopping at Finsbury Park for easy access to the City. The additional through trains, especially at 1714 and 1814 are brilliant – but why not add a through 1614?

Still, I guess on the whole, despite the overcrowding, things are better than they were.

If only FCC could do something about their communications when things go wrong. I know a really good crisis management consultant...

Crisis timetable

THE REASON was quite simple. It was feared that the couplings on FCC's class 365 trains wouldn't couple and uncouple in those freezing conditions.

Consequently, three 4-car class 365s shuttled between Lynn and Royston, all stations; change at Royston for Kings Cross.

The hourly FCC service started at 0450 from Lynn (connection arriving 0731 at Kings Cross). Nearly an hour longer than usual isn't exactly good, but, to partially compensate, the first train did start nice and early.

Come the next one – 0550 – it was *too early*. Two minutes too early, compared with the usual 0552. And later on, xx50 services risked being a smack in the teeth to those turning up for and just missing normal xx56 trains.

Not just early leaving Lynn, but from all stations.

Quick crisis management saw xx56 trains hastily reinstated - xx56 in future, please!

The Fenman Interview Jamie Roberts

Home station: Ely

➤ *How often do you use the Fen Line?*

JR: Until lately, 6-7 days a week.

➤ *Where do you travel and why?*

JR: Cambridge – having commuted to Sixth Form for two years, as well as a Saturday job at the W H Smith on the station.

➤ *What's the service's worst aspect?*

JR: FCC brought in the 'Student Connect' discount scheme for sixth formers last year giving 33% off season tickets. It replaced an admittedly unsustainable 75% discount, but FCC got the introduction badly wrong. Students found themselves paying up to £400 more per annum, but without any advance notice – not even a poster. NXEA are more generous in their discounts, but more restricted in availability.

➤ *What's its best point?*

JR: The future is looking interesting, especially with the new 125mph trains hopefully coming in 2015. They could cut plenty of time off the journey to King's Cross. There's still a lot of potential to improve services and in just two years I've seen hourly Sunday services, refurbished trains and improvements to Ely and Cambridge stations introduced.

➤ *What's needed the most? Why?*

JR: Platform extensions at Waterbeach – services to Cambridge are very well used, but get overcrowded. With longer platforms, 8-coach trains could run and provide extra capacity. National Express also need to refurbish their Class 317s on the peak-time Liverpool Street services – they're possibly some of the worst trains in the country in terms of décor and condition.

➤ *Anything else you'd like to say?*

JR: Although the services are good at the moment, they could be much better. The industry needs to put the passenger first – the profits should follow. The railways should be run by people who want to run a good railway, without undue interference from government (i.e. short franchises, large premiums) or shareholders demanding short-term financial gain.

➤ *Finally, is FLUA worthwhile?*

JR: Very much so. Sometimes passengers need a voice, and FLUA can provide it.

Littleport Lines

by Jenny Lowles

I AM WRITING this as we seem to be emerging from the "big freeze," being one which we have not experienced for many years.

First Capital Connect instigated their emergency timetable, which seemed to work although there was only one train an hour to and from King's Lynn. Fortunately, many passengers decided not to travel, which resulted in relatively empty trains. FCC were only caught out when trying to go back to the usual timetable and then they had problems with trains breaking down.

Whilst very inconvenient for the through passengers to London, the shuttle service to Royston otherwise works well – a pity they cannot timetable a few of these through the rush hours to take the pressure off the through trains.

The platforms at Littleport were regularly gritted, apart from one morning when this was delayed and several customers came a cropper on the boards crossing the tracks. The road leading to the car park was often very icy and I understand the gritting of the main car park was not what it should have been. Something to bear in mind for future harsh winters perhaps?

In 2009 I happened to be away during the heat wave of June/July, which caused problems, and also in late October, when buses replaced trains. The notices up at Littleport have been corrected and the bus stop location information is very useful. However, the ticket machine is still troublesome – should FCC be investing in a replacement?

The current normal timetable is an improvement for those of us travelling home from Cambridge as far as Ely. Plenty of trains between 1800 and 1900 leave Cambridge, but the extra trains either terminate at Ely or don't stop at Littleport en route to King's Lynn, as they are too long for the short platforms.

If only they could find space for a Lynn train (all stations) between 1635 and 1740 then that would make a big difference!

New franchise consultations

The new East Coast franchise is to start Summer 2011; the new Greater Anglia one will start April 2011. East Coast includes IEP 'Super Express Trains.' Greater Anglia calls for the provision of Chesterton station. Franchises will be for at least 10 years, up to a maximum of 22 years. All comments due by 19 April.

www.dft.gov.uk/consultations/open/2010-08/
www.dft.gov.uk/consultations/open/2010-07/

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Xanadu on Thames

YOU may not be able to drink the milk of Paradise there quite yet (there's always the champagne bar across the road at St. Pancras if you're really thirsty) but the frame of the great half dome of King's Cross is there to be seen right now, in cold steel.

The concourse will be shifted to the western side of the station, under the dome, this phase of work being scheduled for completion next year.

Station refurbishment work includes the existing roof, now wrapped in plastic sheeting and looking like a modern work of art, and an extra platform on the eastern side (lots of construction activity). Pictures and a video showing what it'll all look like in 2013 are to be found on the Network Rail website:

www.networkrail.co.uk/asp/6288.aspx

No jam tomorrow

A NEW island platform for Cambridge, scheduled for 2011, and a flyover at Hitchin, due in 2013, are planned to tackle congestion hot spots on the line.

Steady as she goes

9 DECEMBER 2009 – Chancellor **Alistair Darling** talks in his Pre-budget Report of “increasing station car park capacity at stations.” 15 December 2009 – Transport Minister **Lord Adonis** sells off the King's Lynn overspill car park at auction.

Fortunately, the buyer, **Nicholas de Savary**, has spoken of keeping, and maybe extending, the overspill car park.

Parliamentary Questions were raised by **Lord Berkeley**, who established that the government hadn't made any assessment of the possible effects on rail usage if the site was lost. He also established that the average occupancy level is 68%.

Our own records show that, like at many outer commuter stations, it's pretty full Tuesdays to Thursdays. 68% - averaged over every day of the year - sounds about right.

Henry Bellingham M.P. hopes to meet **Mr. de Savary** to discuss the next steps soon - we'll let you know of progress.

Pastures new

STARTING his railway career at Littleport in 1959, well-known Ely booking office stalwart **Tony Payton** has now retired. We join countless others in wishing him all the best and record our appreciation for half a century of loyal service.

Tomorrow never comes

HAVING purchased a Forces/Network/Senior railcard, **writes George Chappell**, it seems if you go to the ticket machines at Lynn (maybe elsewhere too) to buy a ticket for tomorrow, the machine will – sometimes, ha, ha – sell you a ticket for the next day but will not give the discounted fare.

You can, of course, get discounted tickets from the ticket office, but are they not wanting us to use the machines to assist the lone ticket seller in the booking office?

Join us from only £4.50 a year! FLUA Membership, Flat 4, 36 Nelson Street, KING'S LYNN, Norfolk, PE30 5DY or www.flua.org.uk/membership

Since we have introduced Corporate Membership, our scope now includes commercial and industrial companies, property developers, estate agents and many other bodies and organisations interested in the Fen Line.

Lady in the Luggage Rack

by Mawrenna Gleid

Do you remember the snow? Most of us thought we'd left it behind in January, but the past week's been a chilly reminder. Just a few icy flakes can bring the service to a complete halt – and snow anywhere along the route often disrupts the entire line.

We're not used to it, you say? An English winter is usually grey and dismal. We don't normally get blizzards, let alone a white Christmas. And although it's beautiful, the disruption caused by snow is usually immense. Late trains, cancellations, heating systems too cold to work – the list goes on.

Yet despite the difficult conditions, it brought out the best in people. When shuttles replaced usual services, commuters merely rolled their eyes and helped explain to others. People gave each other lifts to the station and phoned their friends further down the line to report on delays. The Christmas spirit was everywhere you looked.

So what happened? Well, the first lot of snow melted, January turned into February, and everyone came back to work. Before you could say Jack Frost, we were all back to snatching seats from under the noses of elderly nuns. We forgot we were all in it together.

Of course, it didn't hurt that over Christmas the trains were almost empty. It's easier to be charitable when there's room to breathe out. Those of us who struggled in despite the Arctic conditions felt so virtuous that we overlooked the fact it had taken twice as long to do so.

Even when one train turned back at King's Lynn bypass (snow in the hooter!), shuffling back into the station we'd just left, it didn't diminish the feeling of heroism. When the biggest challenge is finding a path through the fold-up bicycles and into the carriage, it doesn't promote the same feeling of good-will to all men.

As I write this, it's snowing. Perhaps on Monday we'll all be shivering in our snowshoes, waiting to see if a train, any train, will turn up to take us to work. If so, just remember that even the white stuff has a silver lining.

King's Lynn resident Mawrenna is a regular on the Cambridge Run.

Ten Years Ago

It was the “excellent” train service that persuaded Diana Pollen to move to Downham. Disillusionment soon set in, so she started a blow by blow account of her daily journey to London, “The Pollen Count.” It ran for 4 years. And we asked for more parking at all Fen Line stations, suggesting that “joined up thinking” was needed.

FLUA diary 2010
Saturday 27 November
AGM, King's Lynn.