

The Fenman **EXTRA**

Newsletter of the Fen Line Users Association

www.flua.org.uk

fenman@flua.org.uk

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*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**.*

So, has it been worthwhile? Have we actually achieved anything? In our new age of maturity, it seems fair enough to ask ourselves questions such as these. 1985, when FLUA was formed, seems light years away now: new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, "Rainbow Warrior" sunk, disaster at the Heysel Stadium and the first Live Aid concert, to single out just some of the events of that year. FLUA was hardly headlines and anyway, **we wouldn't change anything much, would we?**

Little list

JUDGE for yourself: electrification of the entire line, total redraft of a very unsatisfactory proposed electrification timetable, trains calling at all Fen Line stations – including Waterbeach....

Co-ordination of the King's Cross and Liverpool Street times during peak hours, faster evening trains, the 20.15 and, unfinished business, the 23.15....

Cambridge bus/rail tickets, Stansted Airport tickets valid via Bishop's Stortford, 17.22 relief train to Ely, car parks (more unfinished business)....

There's more, much more: read all about it. We lay no claim to achieving all this singlehanded. But we have packed, and we still pack, a mighty punch. Bring on the Capacity Study and the Thameslink project!

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Ruddy bore?

No, no, not one!

At our 21st birthday party we were treated to much witty discourse from historian **Dr. Paul Richards** and from FCC's **Nigel Holness**, all under the beaming supervision of Mayor **Ann Clery-Fox**.

Pirating more from the eternal works of G&S, here is FLUA's 21st birthday song (Chairman and Chorus) –

Through black of night, and the depth of fright,
when the mists lay low on the fen;
'gainst opposition, took strong position,
a band of women and men;
Over ranks of clerks, won those vital sparks,
the beat of the Fen Line tune;
Now is FLUA's holiday, and now is FLUA's high noon.
Ha! Ha!
And now is FLUA's high noon!

The Fenman EXTRA goes to members and to selected people in the rail industry. It is not on public display at stations.

THE FEN LINE



USERS ASSOCIATION

Contacting FLUA

Colin Sampson, Chairman

Tel: 01366 388003

or reach FLUA on:

e-mail: secretary@flua.org.uk

Andy Tyler, Secretary

Flat 4, 36 Nelson Street

KING'S LYNN, Norfolk, PE30 5DY

Tel: 07803 459 043

Chris Hayes, Treasurer

Robert Stripe, Vice-Chairman

What to do with the Fen Line?

BISHOPS STORTFORD-CAMBRIDGE was opened to electric services on 11 May 1987 (though a few services had started on 19 January). Liverpool Street-King's Lynn services then swapped their electric loco for a diesel one at Cambridge, taking *nine* minutes to effect the transfer. Hopelessly inefficient, that couldn't last.

FLUA was there relentlessly in the thick of the campaigning; not a trick was missed. When Royston-Cambridge was opened to electric trains on 16 May 1988 suddenly the fast route to Town was available.

Cold steel

Cambridge-King's Lynn electrification authorised on 7 February 1989 at a then cost of £20.5m (£11m infrastructure, and £9.5m rolling stock) –

- overhead line equipment installation;
 - signalling immunisation;
 - telecoms renewal;
 - bridge works;
- level crossing modernisation;
 - platform lengthening;
 - rolling stock purchase.
- 2085 pieces of steel 'uprights' (cantilevers and portal structures);
- 2009 foundations (piled, gravity, side bearing);
 - 92 tension lengths;
- 24 main permanent way stages, starting June 1991, ending with the Ely blockade.

Clear signals

Ely Route Rationalisation and resignalling was authorised on 2 July 1990 at a then cost of £11.73m –

- area resignalling (colour lights);
- signalbox closures, control from Cambridge;
 - layout rationalisation;
- level crossing modernisation;
 - platform lengthening;
- temporary station at Chettisham.

*Technical data - lecture to Norfolk Railway Society, 16 May 1991, by **Stuart Calvert**, Project Manager, West Anglia & Great Northern, Network South East*

By rail to Victory

IT WAS unity of purpose amongst all the interested parties, such as FLUA, that carried the day. Electrification wouldn't have happened if *Network SouthEast* hadn't wanted it, the public hadn't wanted it, and, ultimately, if there wasn't financial support.

The Department of Transport had to be clear that public money was being well spent.

King's Lynn Council started the ball rolling at FLUA's 1986 AGM, when its leader **Ian Stockwell** announced that the Council would spearhead a campaign for electric trains all the way to King's Lynn. And the campaign just mushroomed.

But ironically, for a line across the Fens, it was an uphill struggle all the way. What prevailed came about because –

- financial appraisal started out with "steam age," loco-hauled 9-coach operations – highly inefficient;
- the electrification team and its equipment were already in the area, wiring the ECML at Peterborough – no set-up costs;
- Royston-Cambridge had been wired on the cheap and needed a secure power feed – at Milton, near Waterbeach;
- the necessary second power feed would have to be at South Lynn – the power company was already investing alongside the railway there for its own purposes;
- there was slack in the workings of electric units working south of Cambridge – only 7 new trains were needed;
- parts of the line had already been singled – not so much overhead equipment was needed;
- there were few over-bridges requiring raising for electrical clearances – a major cost item largely avoided;
- there was political and media support across the entire spectrum – priceless;
- King's Lynn Council saw electrification with its fixed equipment as bringing long-term stability to the line – it was prepared to guarantee revenue.

With such tremendous support, it wasn't practical politics to ignore these facts.

Round two

Continued from The Fenman EXTRA November 2006

1999 saw the debut of *The Fenman EXTRA* with a humorous (and painful) look at the blockade.

“Like on every other single expanding long-distance commuter route, Fen Line users need adequate station car park provided” we said at the end of 1999. “Unsurprisingly the Downham Market station car park problem came right to the fore [at the AGM].”

The Winter 1999/2000 issue was the first one to carry **Diana Pollen’s** inimitable *The Pollen Count*. She’d moved to Downham, swayed by the good train service, and commuted to London daily. “Well,” she said, “the old lags reading this are probably wondering how long it took to disillusion me. Not long! Both morning and evening peak timetables too often seem to be works of fiction.”

Another FLUA success was official acceptance of tickets to Stansted Airport via Bishop’s Stortford – often the fastest, but not the shortest, route.

Spring 2000 and a new century. “House prices being what they are,” we reported, “it’s small wonder that a recent *Sunday Telegraph* book features ‘Commuterland’ as starting at King’s Lynn. Especially welcome was the speeding up of the 22.15 from King’s Cross, arriving Lynn at 23.50, twenty-five minutes earlier than before.

By the Summer we saw our main concerns as working with WAGN’s new owners, National Express, on service delivery, securing the future of the Liverpool Street peak period through trains and developing a constructive relationship with the Thameslink 2000 operator. 2 out of 3 isn’t too bad – we are still waiting for the last one!

6 September 2000, we reported, was the day when Cambridge-Ely replacement buses – the wires were down – were open toppers!

Then farce turned to tragedy. 17 October 2000 was the day of the Hatfield disaster. Some weeks later *The Fenman* was critical of “unworkable timetables, failure to run through services, lack of passenger comfort and really wretched communications.” Inevitably, perhaps, refranchising was delayed.

“FLUA campaigned remorselessly for the late London departure to be extended through to Lynn...we were delighted when WAGN extended this...on Friday and Saturday nights,” we said in early 2001. “And now WAGN is introducing ...the late night Saturday departure from Lynn [23.15 to Cambridge] that we have long campaigned for.”

Next came the news that WAGN was to be split into two as a step towards Thameslink 2000. “There is a need to put in the basic fundamentals...station facilities, enough car parking, information,” thundered *The Fenman*, ending with a word for the newly re-elected Prime Minister. “...more long-term capacity...that’s where delivering Thameslink 2000 comes into it, **Tony!**”

“One year on from Hatfield and, if anything, things are worse – it’s easy to see why so many people feel that way, whatever the cold statistics may say,” we remarked in *The Fenman* that Autumn. There was an acknowledgement from WAGN that it was “not unreasonable” (you following this?) for emergency timetables to connect [at Cambridge].

Winter 2001/2 saw *The Fenman* pointing out “there’s ... a big 90 minute gap between 19.45 and 21.15” from King’s Cross; the lack of mid-evening trains from Cambridge was of particular concern to us. “FLUA has been discussing with WAGN a possible way to fill the gap.”

By early 2002, plugging the gap seemed to require losing several connections from Liverpool Street. “We note...King’s Cross and Liverpool Street services in the future [will be] run by two, different companies,” we said. We wanted “both of our routes working *together* – to give us a train every half-hour!”

Friday 10 May 2002, is the day we will never forget: Potters Bar. The 12.45 King’s Cross-King’s Lynn, 7 dead. “With investment in safety and capacity, we can,” we prayed, “look back at Potters Bar in sorrow *and* also in the knowledge that it marked a turning point too.”

The last issue of *The Fenman* in 2002 asked “what now, though – manage demand or invest in growth?” We knew where we stood. “Longer trains and bigger car parks – we sorely need you!”

...concluded on page 4.

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It was in the light of Fen Line growth that we returned to the issue of refranchising the following year, 2003. “The decision as to the immediate future of Great Northern needs to stress a commitment to Thameslink 2000. Anything other implies retreat.”

Issue 3/2003 of *The Fenman* was straight to the point. “Car parks – stop blithering while the years go by and get building, please - your customers need you to act now..... Fill the holes and gaps in the timetable too, please.”

And the Autumn edition of *The Fenman EXTRA* touched on a particular sore point. “There are plenty of times when the odds of seeing a ticket inspector are a steal. Especially for short journeys.” We noted it might be cheaper to forgo the money and save the wages. Our message? “Don’t let short term gain repel your long term customers.”

Reporting on the 2003 AGM, we noted Route Director **James Adeshiyan’s** telling point – “the biggest trick we missed,” he said “is the growth of executive housing. People are travelling further to London and we haven’t acted quickly enough.” Bigger car parks, better information, tweaked timetables and more realistic aims were promised.

Fenliner had arrived by 2004 with a brand new column. “New car parks at Downham and Littleport in use, re-branding and the long awaited 20.15 running,” said Fenliner in *The Fenman* issue 2/2004. The car park extension at Waterbeach was due to start “this summer” and ‘one’ had arrived on the Liverpool Street route.

The following edition – the “luggage rack issue” - asked “what do we really, really want? Longer, faster trains, reliable track and power, better access to central London.” We continued, “could there be a name for all this? How about ‘Thameslink 2000?’”

With rail reorganisation in the air and a plethora of different ownerships and managements, *The Fenman* issue 4/2004 had this to say. “To the passengers, the ones who pay the wages, it doesn’t matter a fig what goes in. It’s what comes out that’s everything.”

A few months on and we were noting, “King’s Lynn has been exceptionally busy,” said estate agent **Malcolm Duffy** in a recent *EDP* front page story, “with people buying homes as a base for going to work in Cambridge.” Major engineering works meant two lengthy blockades over Bank Holiday periods.

We applauded the timing – working days were largely unaffected – but deplored the small amount of notice we were given. CIS screens were on their way to WAGN stations. Car parking at Ely, by now managed by ‘one,’ “is under severe strain.” And we were pushing for yet more car parking at Downham.

***The Fenman EXTRA* of April 2005 set out suggestions to ‘one,’ who had been tremendously forthcoming in consulting us, setting out how the Liverpool Street route could work hand in glove with the King’s Cross route to give us a greatly improved morning peak service.**

We felt the need to stress in issue 3/2005 that tweaking Liverpool Street trains wasn’t a sell-out, ditching the faster King’s Cross route. ‘one’ had taken up nearly everything we had suggested and, paradoxically perhaps, we had much better King’s Cross arrivals in the morning peak to look forward to.

Five bidders for the new ‘Thameslink Great Northern’ franchise and we had talked to them all – that was our message in the last issue of *The Fenman* for 2005. Biggest issues raised by us? Car parks and ticket inspection – “both insufficient.” But work had started on a 96-space car park extension at Lynn.

The accompanying October 2005 edition of *The Fenman EXTRA* deplored the downside of the penalty fares system – “free riding braggarts.” Our answer? “Set out to collect *all* the fares.”

A few months later there was a new face in town – First Capital Connect. FCC brought with them a long list of plans and improvements. Too soon to judge, but the new franchisee has a huge task in dealing with the growing overcrowding, ahead of the works involved in the Thameslink project.

Looking back, we think FLUA’s done an awful lot. Looking forward, we say, stay on board - you can see there’s a lot more to do, together!