

# Alton Line News

Newsletter of the Alton Line Users' Association

Winter 2010

<http://www.altonlineusers.com>

36 years serving users of Alton, Bentley, Farnham, Aldershot and Ash Vale stations

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**Annual membership: £3 due 1 March 2010 (to be sent to the above address)**

## Fare Increases Update.

As part of the Spending Review announced on 20th October, the government has announced that the cap on regulated fare increases will change from January 2012. Presently, regulated fares (including Season tickets) are only allowed to rise at the Retail Price Index (RPI) of the previous July + 1%. This means that in January 2011, these fares can only rise by an average of 5.8%. (Increases in individual fares can vary by +5%, as long as the overall increase across all of a train operator's fares does not exceed this cap). From January 2012, the government will allow train companies to increase prices by an average of RPI + 3%. If RPI continues at its current level, this could lead to rises of 7-9% *per year*. (This equates to a yearly increase of £250-£300 for an annual ticket from Alton to Waterloo). Unregulated fares (including Off Peak day tickets) are not capped and can be increased as much as the train operator wishes. These fares can also have time restrictions imposed or altered to force passengers to use more expensive tickets, as happened with Super Off Peak tickets in January 2010.

In the current climate of pay freezes and benefit cuts, ALUA are concerned that large increases would lead to increased pressure on already stretched families and result in people abandoning the train for their cars. South West Trains have not yet announced their fare rises for 2011, but we would encourage them to keep future regulated and unregulated fare rises at a reasonable level, and remind them that the figure is a cap, rather than a mandatory rise. We would also be strongly opposed to any further time-restrictions being applied to Off Peak tickets, as we have a very slow off-peak service on the Alton line.

## Period returns

The current fares on the Alton Line offer very poor value to passengers who wish to travel out one day and return on a later date. A passenger travelling from

London to Ash Vale and returning the same day would pay £13.60 for a Off-Peak Day return. However, if they wish to return the next day, they are forced to pay £24.30 for an Off Peak return (with one month validity and peak time restrictions), or absurdly, *only £24.20* for two Anytime Singles (with no time restrictions). This is 80% more than the Day Return, for exactly the same number of trips! Passengers travelling to Alton fare a little better, but the difference in price is still 50%. We encourage SWT to review the prices of these Off Peak (one month) tickets to bring them closer to the equivalent Day tickets, providing better value for passengers and perhaps encouraging more people out of their cars. Note that an Off Peak Day return is also slightly cheaper from London to Alton stations than it is to London.



*Sign on platform 3 at Alton station*

## Signalling and delays

Alton-bound commuters were delayed on 1 October for up to three hours at Aldershot when the line was closed due to a signal failure. There appears to have been confusion as to how passengers were expected to complete their journey. We understand that some passengers were told to pay for taxis and then reclaim expenses\* from SWT whilst others were told that buses

would be available. Although some staff were praised for their attempts to provide information there appears to have been very little communication both within SWT and to passengers as to what passengers should do. How long does SWT think our passengers should wait for buses when local taxis are available outside the station? We would like to know. This is an area in which SWT needs to make considerable improvement.

We are increasingly concerned about the continuous breakdown of signals on the line. We were promised renewal of these in the days of Railtrack, and Network Rail having planned and costed the work several years ago keep putting the work off and breaking their promises. Compared to the new Mid-Hants railway signalling our signalling between Alton and Aldershot should be consigned to a museum. We are asking Andy Pitt, Managing Director of SWT and his operating managers to put this on their agenda as a matter of urgency as this will not only improve running times and reliability but will also put the words customer service further up their agenda.

***\*Expenses should be claimed from Customer Service Centre, Overline House, Blechyndon Terrace, Southampton SO151GW.***

## AROUND THE STATIONS

### Alton



An opening ceremony was recently attended by SWT, Treloars, Alton Town Council, Network Rail & ALUA to mark the recent improvements to the station which cost over £150,000. These have been very warmly welcomed. The station now benefits from a new lower ticket window, disabled toilets, refurbishment of the existing toilets and automatic doors to the booking hall. Painting has also smartened up much of the station.

For 18 months, there has been nowhere to park when meeting people or popping in to the station for information or to pick up tickets in advance. We have now been informed that those stopping for under 20 minutes need not pay and should inform either the booking office staff or Christine to avoid a penalty ticket. The trees in the car park will soon be pruned.

The new departure screen on Platform 1 is badly placed and the old displays showing departures from Platform 1 still causes confusion as some passengers are not aware that the next train may depart from platform 2.

### Bentley

We're lucky that Bentley is manned weekday mornings, as the station serves a wide area. The car park overflows on weekdays, with considerable overspill along the adjacent narrow road. This could be dangerous if emergency vehicles could not get through, so 14 new spaces have been created with more planned along the track at the Alton end. Some of the new spaces have simply replaced others used unofficially, while nine at the Alton end are unsuitable for large cars. There are now 105 spaces, including two for the "disabled".

Another unresolved concern is where "replacement buses" stop when the line is closed. At our other stations, these buses stop either at or very close to the stations, as they are supposed to do. At Bentley, however, the designated stops are over a mile from the station, even though the station car park has ample room at weekends. A commonsense solution now appears to have been found, but we don't know what it is.

Although we're grateful that the 0851 "up" train has been classified as "off-peak" (even though it arrives in Waterloo a minute before the "deadline" of 10.am) the position of the 10.51 is still unresolved. Although classified as "off-peak" (as opposed to "super off-peak") Bentley passengers have been able to buy "super off-peak" tickets as the first "super off-peak" train – the 11.15 from Alton – doesn't stop at Bentley, but how long this dispensation will continue is unclear.

### Farnham

The re-arrangement of the downside car park has been carried out by Network Rail without consultation with the users or the present season ticket holders. We are concerned that the 30 year old pick up and drop off principle has been lost and resulting in dangerous reversing movements in the area. We appreciate that this will generate £34,100 per annum in parking fees if all the season ticket holder spaces are used, but it has also generated poor customer relations. We will ask for this to be reviewed as soon as possible. We have also lost much of the last area of green grass in the vicinity.

With the imminent addition of new CCTV cameras on the platforms at Farnham we are very concerned that this might lead to a reduction in staffing especially at the evenings and weekends. We have already been alerted to the fact that Alton, Farnham and Aldershot stations will have only one member of staff present after 8pm. In the light of recent problems on the Alton line we would like SWT to confirm that there will be an adequate number of competent staff to deal with problems as they arise.

## Aldershot

There is little new to report from this station. We hope that the station will be refurbished in the near future. Staffing shortages would appear to result in periods when the ticket office or gates are not manned.

## Ash Vale

Ash Vale has again fallen victim to staff cuts. From September, the ticket office has been shut on Sundays forcing passengers to use the single ticket machine. It cannot be relied on to work correctly (sometimes refusing to take cash, or being completely out of order).

Vandalism and antisocial behaviour continue to be a problem on the station. Despite the best efforts of the staff, there is still an issue with graffiti and litter and the smoking ban is openly flouted (with nobody present to enforce it). This makes the station feel very unwelcoming, particularly in the late evenings. We are pleased to see posters directing passengers to North Camp station have been reinstated. This interchange should be promoted more heavily by SWT, especially when the Alton line is closed for engineering work, as passengers could travel from North Camp to Guildford.



*Class 450 'Desiro' operates in multiples of 4 coaches*



*Class 444 operates in multiples of 5 coaches*

## Long trains: short platforms

Although most passengers can cope with only selective doors on 10, and 12 car trains opening, at some stations with short platforms for those wishing to travel with pushchairs, wheelchairs or bicycles between Alton and Bentley it is a bigger problem. At Alton only the doors on the rear 5 carriages open on 10 coach trains yet only one door in the front 5 coaches opens at Bentley. A similar situation arises with 12 coach trains where doors in only the rear 8 coaches open at Alton but at Bentley only the front 4 carriage doors open. This means anyone travelling from Alton to Bentley is not in the right portion of the train and if they cannot travel through the train cannot get off at Bentley. Admittedly these passengers are few in number but the situation does arise from time to time. Cyclists have been seen pushing their bicycles through several carriages in order to get out at Bentley. We will be asking at our next meeting with SWT if they have any plans to address this issue.

## Ticket machines

The ticket machines at North Camp and presumably other First Great Western stations appear to offer a much wider range of tickets than those to be found at SWT stations. A quick test of the machines showed tickets could be bought to stations such as Machynlleth (Wales) and Lanark (Scotland) to name just two which are unavailable to passengers on the Alton line. This begs the question what commercial decisions are used when deciding that we should only be able to buy a more limited range of tickets from a machine. We understand that SWT could have given passengers a much wider range of destinations at their ticket machines but the decision to do so was down to the extra cost to SWT.

## Right time railway group

For some time we have had a member of the committee sitting on this group which comprises 13 regular members from SWT, FGW, ALUA and Network Rail. These include frontline staff so discussions are meaningful and do become part of their work objectives. One success was moving the barrow crossing at Alton to enable disabled passengers to cross the line when a 12-car train is in the station. We are now trying to obtain a suitable canopy /shelter to be positioned near to the crossing so inclement weather can be catered for. Funding for this has now been found. This is just one of many suggestions put forward from ALUA and taken up by Right Time group.

## Trolley service

On Mondays to Fridays a trolley service will be operating on the 8.25 from Waterloo and the 10.14am from Alton. We look forward to seeing how much it is used by passengers. Possibly other 444 trains on the Alton line could provide this facility.



Staff hard at work clearing the platforms at Farnham January 2010

## Christmas and New Year trains

**We advise all passengers to consult notices at stations and the companies' websites for full details of train services over the holiday period, particularly as there will be no services into Reading for several days. We understand that PEAK FARES will still apply during weekdays even when a Saturday service is being operated.**

### Summary of SWT services

**Christmas Eve 24 Dec – Saturday service** with revisions and cancellations after 1900.

**Christmas Day and Boxing day 25-26 Dec – Closed**

**Monday 27 Dec - Saturday service with some early morning trains cancelled.** Some lines at Clapham Junction will be closed all day due to engineering work and a reduced train service will run in and out of London Waterloo. Many trains will make extra stops or be revised with extended journey times. All passengers are advised to check times before travelling.

**Tuesday 28- Friday 31 Dec - Saturday service.**  
**Saturday 1 – Sunday 2 Jan - Sunday service**  
**Monday 3 January - Saturday service.**

## Beyond Alton

We have learnt from the Parry People Movers website that representatives from Hampshire County Council have recently visited Parry People Movers' service at Stourbridge to ride on the class 139 which operates there. The class 139 vehicle is a unique form of lightweight railcar that can provide services which might otherwise be uneconomical. HCC is in talks with Medstead Parish council and the Mid-Hants Railway on a railcar service between Medstead & Four Marks and Alton. It is hoped that more news about this possible service will be available shortly.

## Staff changes

We are sorry to learn that our Group Station Manager Dave Josey is moving on all be it not far. Dave has been with us on the Alton line for several years and has been, in our opinion, a most helpful and constructive manager. His best attribute is that he listens to us and follows through with the points he has agreed. This makes for great customer service and public relations. Good luck Dave and thank you from all in ALUA. We understand that the new manager is Jason Murphy.

## ALUA Committee

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