

## **The human cost of commuting.**

*. 'It's so awful. Just completely taking over our lives, so you just feel like collapsing in floods of tears. Rail staff aren't sympathetic, as probably had enough themselves. Got to go back in tomorrow, and just feel complete trepidation, as constantly going through the mill in terms of frustration and so much time wasted. 4.5 hours for me today, just in and out of London. Constant battle with trains makes work pale into insignificance, and no home life or R&R.'*  
Email from HAA member.

Commuting by train to London has never been an easy option, but here at Hassocks we feel it has never been so bad, and for so long, as it is now. Catherine Cassidy was therefore surprised to hear at the third meeting of the Thameslink Programme Stakeholders Reference Group on 28<sup>th</sup> April that performance figures had improved overall over the past two months. When she pointed out that this went against the perception of Hassocks users she was told that the last two weeks had been very difficult and had gone 'against the trend' as there had been infrastructure failures, a derailment, trespasses on the line and an average of three fatalities a day over the last three weeks.

Could there also be another reason? One very frequent complaint by Hassocks users is 'station skipping'. Trains, scheduled to stop at Hassocks, run straight through, enabling them to arrive at their final destination within the period of grace which allows the service to be deemed 'on time'. Is this part of the reason why performance figures have improved? And Hassocks has not felt the benefit? It is more than ever essential that if this happens to you, you immediately email the details to the operating company so that a complaint can be registered. This can easily be done if you have your tablet or laptop in your brief case. It will be therapeutic to relieve your feelings, especially if you add a note to explain how this is affecting your life. Moreover, it helps emphasise the message that Hassocks is a vital hub station, with a steadily increasing footfall – not one which is a prime candidate for 'skipping'.

Catherine did, however, return to Hassocks with some good news. Driver numbers are improving with 29 new Southern Rail drivers and 16 new Thameslink drivers by May, with extra despatch staff in the morning peak at East Croydon, and the right level of staffing at London Bridge. Thameslink are doubling the length of many of their four carriage peak hour trains. A new Thameslink timetable from 17 May has some adjustments to timings which should bring better reliability. Peter Gibbons' analysis is attached.

Improvements to the train delay compensation scheme are being sought but all discussion is on hold pending the general election. At present, if your journey has been delayed by thirty minutes or more against the published train schedule, including train cancellation, then you should be eligible for compensation. Train delay scheme compensation forms can be downloaded from the Southern and Thameslink web sites. Do not lose your ticket – you will need to scan it in. Season ticket holders may be eligible for enhanced compensation if their train is delayed more than 30 minutes on twelve days within a period of about a month. Full details are on the websites.

**Leafletting at the station.** As mentioned in the last newsletter, we were at the station on the 27<sup>th</sup> March from 5.00 a.m. to 10 a.m. We distributed 600 copies of the attached leaflet publicising the work of the rail group, and enclosing an HAA membership form in the hope of attracting new members. Lots of commuters said nice, congratulatory things and we watched them carefully reading the leaflets (they had plenty of time, the trains were running late!) Four became members. Where are we going wrong? Your ideas please.

**Spitalford Bridge.** The bus shelter has arrived, financed by the Parish council in conjunction with WSCC. Made of aluminium and toughened glass, it gives shelter from the wind, catches the sun and allows people to spot their bus. Our treasurer, Bob Kenhard, co-ordinated the project and it was

through his indefatigable efforts that the derelict wall was finally removed and the new wall built, with its insert of railings to give a view of the stream. The paperwork and multiplicity of agencies involved was unbelievable. The help and financial support of West Sussex County Council and Andy Petch, our County Councillor, has been crucial throughout this long and tedious process. All that now needs to be done is the provision of a new display board highlighting the importance of the stream and new native species planting on the stream bank – and, unfortunately, the payment of an unexpected VAT bill for £1,500. We are planning an ‘official opening’ at 11 a.m. on Saturday July 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Greening Hassocks.** Our ‘green group’ will be at work on the beds outside the pet shop on Sunday morning 10<sup>th</sup> May, weather permitting. Like all gardeners in Hassocks, we are desperate for rain and just hope that we have some deluges (at night!) in the next few days to make weeding and planting possible. Three large planters are now being installed at Keymer Parade, and the group will be planting them up, as well as looking after the planter outside the Sorting Office and – a new venture – the horse trough at Stonepound Cross Roads. More helpers would be very welcome. Email Georgia Cheshire on [iangorgia@hotmail.com](mailto:iangorgia@hotmail.com) or turn up on Sunday.

**The future of HAA.** The completion of the Spitalford Bridge restoration brings a successful close to our major projects, though of course our commitment to the work on the ‘greening of Hassocks’ as well as our concern for rail services and the station continues. It is therefore an appropriate time to think about our role in the village, and it has become more urgent as, although our membership slowly grows, our active membership declines as age takes its toll. The May issue of *Talk About* includes an item which summarises our thinking. So far, the response has been nil.

### **Celebration or Wake?**

Windmill sweeps rotating, a brand new station, a restored bridge – what have they in common? They were all community initiatives none of which were thought to be achievable. Hassocks Amenity Association (HAA) took a deep breath and decided to ‘give them a go’. The rest is history. Oldland Mill is now a Charitable Trust in its own right, with a national reputation; the comfort and convenience of the award winning station design is compensating a little for the long waits being endured by commuters; Spitalford Bridge will be a much pleasanter place to queue for a bus when it has its new shelter and seat.

Do these projects reflect the concerns of the majority of residents? Some would say that today HAA should instead be more proactive in defence of our green spaces. Others point out that there is no single voice that speaks for residents of all ages.

In a few years, HAA will be fifty years old. Will it manage to reach its birthday? Has it outlived its purpose? Should its role change? This is the irony of the situation: there is a greater need for community involvement in the life of Hassocks than ever before. Services, previously the responsibility of local government, are now dependent on local provision. The gap left by the closure of the Beacon Centre is a particularly worrying consequence.

Any association is only as active and as strong as its membership. HAA membership increases slowly, but members willing to take an active part in the Association fade away as age takes its toll. If HAA is to continue to exist, a blood transfusion is needed. We need people who can see the big picture: how can all the goodwill and enthusiasm of the many small community groups in Hassocks be channelled to work most effectively? What new ground should HAA be breaking? We need ‘doers’ - a committee secretary, a general secretary, people with IT, journalistic or publicity skills, and those who know their way around the social media. Above all, we need people who, despite their busy lives, are enthusiastic, prepared to give up some of their scarce free time to use their skills to enhance the quality of life in Hassocks, not necessarily to attend more committee meetings!

**HAA needs you now. Tomorrow may be too late.** Please contact:

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What is your reaction? Please let us know. All comments and suggestions and – above all – offers of help would be very much appreciated.

Best wishes, Margaret Ford