

Affordable Rail Travel

— Alan Sencicle —

Prospects for exploring Britain by train were greatly improved when the Javelin High-Speed train commenced operation from Dover Priory in December 2009. Earlier on January 21st, members of the Society had enjoyed a visit to the Hitachi maintenance depot in Ashford at a time when the new rolling stock was being delivered at the rate of a train each week.

Although the location of St. Pancras is not ideal for access to London tourist attractions, it is well placed for onward rail travel, particularly for East Midland services from the same station or King's Cross. Euston is just over 10 minutes' walk or 1 stop along the Northern line and Paddington is a 10-minute journey using the Hammersmith and City line. Once in London, many interesting destinations can be reached fairly quickly. Bristol, Manchester, Liverpool and York in around 2 hours, Newcastle in 3 hours, Glasgow and Edinburgh in less than 4½ hours. Leaving Dover Priory at am it is even possible to be in Inverness just after 8 pm the same day.

Due to the perceived high cost of rail fares, many of our members resort to coach travel. This has partly come about because affordable advance rail fares have not been available for journeys within the network operated solely by Southeastern Railway since the company was awarded the franchise in 2006. As a result, journeys to and from London are expensive compared to far cheaper advance

fares available elsewhere from other rail companies. The cost of a high-speed rail journey to Dover from London is £40 for a standard class monthly return. Compare this with advance return fares from London to Birmingham - £12, Chester, Manchester and Liverpool - £25, Brighton and Southampton - £10, Bournemouth - £22 and Weymouth - £28.

This gross distortion of the rail fares market is having an adverse effect on the potential for tourism in East Kent. For some years I have been the Dover Society representative on the White Cliffs Country Tourism Alliance (WCCTA). Following extensive research on the availability of cheap rail fares elsewhere, I was asked to approach Southeastern Railway with a view to persuading the company to adopt an advance fares structure. Initially the company outlined a host of reasons why they were reluctant to offer far cheaper advance fares that could reduce the cost of a return journey from Dover to St.



Hitachi Depot Visit

Pancras from £40 to £14.

By supplying Southeastern with a large number of facts which they have been unable to dispute, the current position is that an advance fares structure is now on their agenda. Unfortunately, with the term of the next franchise commencing in October 2014, advance fares are currently on hold. It is disappointing, that so far, the much improved rail service has not brought to Dover, Deal and Sandwich the expected benefits. It is a great pity that it might be almost 5 years following the introduction of the high-speed service before they are finally realised.

In the interim, for Society members wishing to travel to destinations beyond London, many bargain rail journeys are on offer when booked from Dover, Deal or Sandwich. The following rail fares are available now, shown as advance single fares that can be booked up to 12 weeks in advance. Additionally, all these fares are eligible for the one-third off railcard discount shown in brackets.

The real bargains are Chester, Manchester and Liverpool at £17.50 (£11.20) as well as Birmingham for only £12 (£7.90). It is worth mentioning that travel via Manchester, using 2 separate advance single tickets, can be much cheaper than buying 1 advance ticket to such places as Leeds, York and Newcastle, destinations all served directly by East Coast from King's Cross. Although this increases journey times, such an option is valid when comparisons are made with lengthier journey options such as National Express or even travel by car.

All these 'through tickets' permit the use of the high-speed train to St. Pancras

along with London Underground travel within Zone 1. A dagger symbol on the ticket indicates the availability of the latter option.

I once travelled to Manchester by coach during my school days. I won't ever do so again. It would be interesting to compare the current cost and travel time with the senior railcard option of £22.40 return for a typical 4-hour journey each way?

Finding the cheapest advance fares can be a little tricky. Persevere and you will be awarded with significant savings and don't ignore the option of 1st Class travel. Booking a week ahead this may only be slightly more expensive than a Standard ticket. A combination of senior railcards, advance fares and faster journey times can be very attractive. Although advance rail tickets can be purchased from station booking offices, it is far easier to find the bargains by searching online.

I will continue with my campaign in an attempt to bring advance fares to the Southeastern Railway network as soon as possible. Until that welcome day, there are many attractive tourist destinations to which rail fares are cheaper than tickets as far as London.

Another stumbling block is the lack of adequate car parking at Dover Priory where there are only 31 spaces. This almost certainly results in commuters driving to park at Folkestone or Ashford. Could this explain the reduction of passenger numbers using the station since the coming of the Javelin trains?

Useful websites:

www.southeasternrailway.co.uk and

www.rail-reg.gov.uk