



BARKING – GOSPEL OAK RAIL USER GROUP

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THE HISTORY OF THE BARKING – GOSPEL OAK PIXC-BUSTER

“**PIXC** = **P**assengers **I**n **eX**cess of **C**apacity”. This is the Department for Transport (DfT) acronym for severely overcrowded trains and *PICX-busters* are extra trains put on to try and reduce the overcrowding.

Back in 2005, Barking – Gospel Oak passenger services were franchised out to National Express subsidiary, Silverlink Train Services. The service ran every 30 minutes during the day, dropping to hourly around 20:00. The service had been run by 1985 built 2-car Class 150 *Sprinters* since they rescued the service in the summer of 1999. Before then trains were operated by 40-years old *slam door* units that were so prone to break-down that 60, even 90 minute gaps in service were a regular occurrence. The *Sprinters* were far more reliable and over the ensuing years passengers were attracted back, mainly by word of mouth, so by late 2004 serious overcrowding was taking place on the 08:08 from Barking.

Following representations by us, the London Transport Users Committee (LTUC), now *London TravelWatch*, took an interest, did some passengers loading surveys and found 264 passengers crammed into the 08:08 from Barking. They arranged a meeting with Silverlink, DfT, Network Rail, Transport for London (TfL) and us. We said that a 20-minute peak frequency was required. Silverlink maintained that it was operating the service it was contracted to provide by the DfT and its 7 strong *Sprinter* fleet was fully utilised. The DfT said it had no money and Network Rail said there would be a Route Study coming out in 2006. TfL were already paying Silverlink for running winter Sunday services and some evening trains, all excluded from the DfT franchise spec. TfL made various non committal remarks including how it wanted control of all London’s heavy rail services and on the cry of “Something must be done” from us and LTUC, the meeting ended.

We reconvened a couple of months later and Silverlink and TfL jointly announced that TfL had funded Silverlink’s obtaining another *Sprinter* (150 121) from fellow National Express subsidiary Central Trains and a morning *PIXC-buster* service would start with the December 2005 timetable! 150 121 duly arrived, repainted in Silverlink colours with *Transport for London* added below the Silverlink logo and worked the first *PIXC-Buster*, the 07:46 Upper Holloway to Barking and 08:23 back. The unit then returned to Willesden TMD, carrying out a further Upper Holloway – Barking trip in the evening.

The new 08:23 ex Barking helped spread the load but inevitably filled up so from 12th June 2006, TfL fully utilised the train they were funding with a more or less 20-minute peak frequency and every half an hour almost to the end of service. This timetable was refined on 11th December when the 20-minute peak frequency was extended to run from 07:00 – 10:30 and 15:30 -20:00 with a 30-minutes interval at other times (except weekends).

Of course a more frequent, reliable peak service attracted ever more passengers. In January 2007, TfL zonal fares were introduced, although with fares still collected by the train guards, it was easy

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to fare dodge. This was a prelude to government ceding control of the Silverlink Metro services to TfL on 11th November 2007.

Upon the transfer to TfL, the line, along with the North and West London Lines and Euston – Watford Junction Local Lines appeared on the Tube map as *London Overground* and Oyster Pay As You Go was accepted. The staffing of all stations and the installation of ticket machines and Oyster readers meant that fare collection was no longer on train. The 9th December 2007 timetable change extended the Monday – Friday timetable to include Saturdays with later evening trains and a much improved, although still every 30 minutes, Sunday service. All these changes naturally attracted more passengers and overcrowding was getting so bad again that the Group was again pressing for *PIXC-busters* and seat removals to allow more standees.

TfL had originally planned to operate the service with 3-car refurbished *Sprinter* trains, although it was never explained where the six extra coaches were going to come from, there being a constant nationwide shortage of diesel trains since privatisation. A large fleet of new electric trains had been ordered for the rest of the Overground. MTR/Laing (later renamed LOROL) secured the Overground operating contract from TfL with a ‘killer bid’ that offered to “throw in” 8x2-car new diesel trains for the Barking – Gospel Oak Line. This offer was snapped up by TfL and right from that moment on the Group insisted that 3-car trains were needed, readers, I think know the rest. In the meantime, TfL agreed to remove seats from the *Sprinter* trains to make more room.

The eight new *Turbostar* trains arrived a year late in late 2010 and due to ongoing engineering works were not able to operate the long planned all day (until 22:00) 15-minute interval service until the following year. By then the overcrowding was just as bad as it had been with *Sprinters* on a 20-minute interval peak service. On 12th September 2011, an unadvertised *PIXC-buster* service started running from Woodgrange Park (07:59) to Upper Holloway (08:26). This was operated by the unit booked as spare for the day and reflected growing confidence in the new trains’ reliability. The train could not serve Gospel Oak as the bay platform was already occupied, so the Group asked for the train to run onto Hampstead Heath in service before running empty back to Willesden TMD. The extension started on 12th December and the train appeared in the timetable.

On 9th December 2013, the morning *PIXC-buster* working was altered to arrive at Barking earlier to form a 06:52 Barking to South Tottenham before running empty back to Upney Junction to reverse and form the 07:59 ex Woodgrange Park now running in passenger service all the way to Willesden Junction Low Level! LOROL later admitted to us that this extension also provided relief over that section of the North London Line. However, the time taken to reach Willesden Junction Low Level after Kensal Rise (17 minutes!), means that it is quicker to alight at Kensal Rise and catch the following train! Of course, being the only train off the Barking branch, this train has now built up its own cliental, causing the question, is it still a true *PIXC-buster*? Back in 2007, TfL envisaged that when the all day 4 trains per hour (tph) service was achieved, 2tph would run beyond Gospel Oak to Clapham Junction. Alas, that aspiration appears to have been kicked into the very long grass!

The final chapter, so far, in the Barking – Gospel Oak *PIXC-buster* story occurred on 14th December 2014. An earlier first train from Barking to Gospel Oak was put on at 06:08. TfL call this a *PIXC-buster*, but we look on it as much needed earlier first train, which should actually depart at 06:03. LOROL have said that Barking – Gospel Oak has the earliest starting morning peak on the whole Overground network! BGORUG believes that a 05:47 from Barking should be trialled and the first train from Gospel Oak should be 06:05 and not 06:20 as now. The morning

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PIXC-buster diagram remained unaltered, but what really caused surprise was the introduction of an evening *PIXC-buster* diagram!

TfL and LOROL had always been cautious about committing the spare unit to too much of its own work since while it was working its own trains it was not available to cover breakdowns of other trains. So committing it to evening *PIXC-workings* showed the concern overcrowding was causing at City Hall and Swiss Cottage. The evening diagram consisted of running empty to South Tottenham to form a 17:19 to Gospel Oak. Here the unit that previously formed the 17:35 to Barking performed a quick turnaround and formed a new 17:28 for Barking. The *PIXC-buster* set then took over the 17:35 journey which was retimed to run 2 minutes later (17:37). Then things returned to normal, apart from the *PIXC-buster* set working an 18:58 Barking – Upper Holloway on its way home to Willesden TMD. The problem with this arrangement was that if the spare unit was already covering for a failed train, the *PIXC-buster* 17:37 from Gospel Oak could not run leaving a 22 minute gap in service. The obvious thing to do then was to cancel the 17:28 and use it to form the 17:37 to restore a more or less 15-minute interval service. This didn't occur to LOROL, but after we pointed this out to them they agreed with us a 'contingency plan' not to cancel the 17:28 (too difficult!) but to hold it at Gospel Oak until 17:37 and let it run in path of the cancelled 17:37! Since then, this contingency plan has usually been implemented if the *PIXC-buster* cannot run. TfL maintains that it introduced four trains to combat overcrowding on 14th December, but BGORUG disputes this. As already stated, we look on the 06:08 as an extension of the service with a new first train. The 17:19 South Tottenham – Gospel Oak is merely a positioning move to get the unit to Gospel Oak as the 18:58 Barking – Upper Holloway is just part of getting the set back to the depot.

So, for now, ends the story of the Barking – Gospel Oak *PIXC-busters*, celebrating their 10th anniversary on 12th December 2015!

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