

BARKING-GOSPEL OAK LINE USER GROUP

www.barking-gospeloak.org.uk

NOVEMBER 11th: INTO A BRAND NEW AGE!

Silverlink duly bowed out on Saturday November 10th, and on Sunday November 11th, the Brand New Age under Transport for London (TfL) began. Not without its hitches; the first London Overground train out of Gospel Oak only just made it up a wet and slippery Queens Road bank thanks to heroic efforts by the driver (Network Rail presumably not having done their stuff during the night), and so left Barking a few minutes late on its first run back West. But station staff were in evidence at each stop for the first time in uncountable years, and the conductor made helpful (and audible) announcements and collected fares. And impressively Blackhorse Road had been fitted out with new signage between Saturday night and Sunday morning. Inevitably there were teething problems – the station staff's mobile phone links back to base didn't work, and the first two days suffered cancellations. But we accept that not everything can happen overnight – though that's not to say we won't be on new operator LOROL's tail PDQ if things don't change significantly for the better within a reasonable timescale.

So it's farewell Silverlink and National Express, and it is unlikely that many of the line's users will mourn their passing – and not just because of the shambles of their final few weeks with its peak-hour cancellations and drivers' strikes. True, things did improve during their period of control (they could hardly have got worse than the depths plumbed by their predecessors North London Railways in the mid-to-late 90s); reliability became very good for a time, and the current timetable - if everything actually runs - is the best we've had for years, thanks to both TfL and Silverlink themselves. But all too often improvements were not sustained, and on occasions it seemed the whole operation was being run on a shoestring, with even simple things taking months to get done. Silverlink's overall performance over their whole tenure can best be summed up as "Disappointingly average, and too frequently falling below even that". Pity – when they put their minds to it they showed they could do it, and with more sustained consistency they would have merited a better epitaph.

But back to the Brand New Age, and all our stations are now staffed from first train to last for the first time in many years – in itself a major improvement - and Oyster Pay-As-You-Go is valid on the line. Station staff don't have facilities to issue tickets, but they can help passengers use the ticket machines which most stations are now equipped with. (Tickets can also still be purchased on trains). They can also answer queries, pass on disruption information more quickly than the existing ailing information systems, and deal with any incidents. Between November and March, all stations will be thoroughly deep-cleaned, and LOROL will then embark on a programme of station refurbishment (or in some cases rebuilding).

As for the train service, this will remain unchanged until December 9th, when the new timetable comes into effect. This will feature a later last-train time from Gospel Oak (something we've been campaigning for for many years), an earlier start and later finish on Sundays, and infilling of the one-hour gaps on Sunday nights. The Saturday service will also be improved to match that which runs on Mondays to Fridays. We and London TravelWatch are continuing to press LOROL and TfL to introduce a 15-minute peak-hour service as soon as possible, to address the already-serious overcrowding which is bound to get worse now the new era has begun, with its attendant publicity. The fact that the line now appears on the Tube map will be a

major boost to public awareness of its existence, and hence of the number of people wanting to use it. Whether TfL and LOROL are braced and ready to meet that challenge remains to be seen. We were dismayed to hear that they intend to return two train units to the leasing company, as they are not required for the Bedford-Bletchley service – we say “Keep them to reinforce our overcrowded rush-hour trains!”.

LOROL intend to extend the Penalty Fare system to our line, but have acknowledged that after years of it being a largely “free railway” this cannot reasonably be done overnight. We have been assured that PFs will be phased-in in a sensible way, and we shall be monitoring this closely (so ignore the posters at Blackhorse Road saying they are already in force – they’re not. But please buy a ticket before you board if you can!). As for bikes, the present situation will remain unchanged, at least for the time being.

WALTHAMSTOW TOWN CENTRE CONSULTATION

Waltham Forest Council have produced their latest master plan for redeveloping the Town Centre (some may say "What - another one?!"). A key element of this is reducing the need to use cars, and for the area south of Walthamstow Central station it includes the following proposal:

"New walkway under the (Chingford) railway line to link this area with the town centre, to be connected to a new high-level platform and station building over the Queens Road station".

We're not quite sure exactly what that means, but it sounds interesting! The Council has advertised that it is running a "consultation roadshow" on the plans in Walthamstow Town Square on Tue 27th Nov, Fri 30th Nov and Sat 1st Dec. The plans are also available on the Council's website, at the Library and the Town Hall.

WITH ALL THIS GOOD NEWS.....IS OUR WORK DONE?

Not a bit of it! We shall continue keeping a very close eye on day-to-day operations and liaising closely with LOROL and TfL over matters of concern (not least the rush-hour overcrowding referred to above, which urgently needs sorting). The fact that electrification is not on the current agenda is disappointing and short-sighted, and we shall continue to lobby hard for this to be implemented. It cannot make any sense long-term to continue operating a diesel-only line surrounded by electrified routes.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

In view of the TfL/LOROL takeover, we have slotted in an extra open meeting on Tuesday November 27th (7 15 to 9 00 pm at Barking Town Hall), to give people an early opportunity to meet the new operators. All welcome!

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