

Just a few more train journeys – Steve and Teds UK train journeys in 2017

The Durham – Bangor journey

My trip to Bangor (Gwynedd) for Xmas 2016 was such a catalogue of errors, delays and misinformation that it would have been a nightmare for anyone less used to train travel, and I wrote about the experience¹. Following that journey, I started to make some brief notes of UK train travel in 2017. This is the resulting document – it is written from my perspective as a frequent traveller, but I have tried to imagine the journeys from the perspective of an occasional traveller.

The good news is that no journey in 2017 was as bad as the Bangor trip – though as you will see below there were plenty of occasions when information was confusing or wrong and advertised facilities missing. I'm going to start with my final journey of 2017 – this year's Xmas journey from Durham to Bangor, to see how it compared. My trip was out on Thursday 21 December and back on Wednesday 27 December, via York, Manchester Piccadilly and Chester in both directions.

Getting the information and buying a ticket was difficult enough. The Network Rail journey planner gave wrong information in both directions. The pocket timetable printed from the planner gave two options which used the same train departing Manchester Piccadilly on the return journey which gave arrival times into Durham which varied by 30 minutes. Searching for tickets on The Virgin Trains East Coast site (I use it by habit, partly for the Nectar points) gave no options between a journey departing Durham at seven in the morning and one at two in the afternoon, which is simply not the case.

At this time of year, the trains were busy though I managed to get a seat on every train. I used an off peak return – there were no advance fares and I prefer having the option of breaking the journey. This year the main problems with delays were on the East Coast Mail Line. On the outward journey to York my delayed Virgin East Coast train was running in the path of a cancelled Cross-Country train and the conductor was busy announcing that people with Cross Country Only tickets that had to get off at the next station, without bothering to reassure people that there was another Cross Country train a few minutes later. Waiting for my return train from York the delay crept up minute by minute (I could have had a pint in the York Tap if I'd known) and the coffee stall on freezing platforms 10/11 was closed at 1700.

I'd forgotten how awful the area by platforms 13/14 area at Manchester Piccadilly is – a few bumperches in a freezing hall laughingly referred to as the lounge and no facilities on the platforms. The Arriva Trains Wales trains between Manchester and Chester² only had 2 coaches. From Chester the Holyhead train had 4 coaches as far as Llandudno Junction the front 2 going forward to Holyhead. The screens at Chester showed exactly the same wrong announcements re which coaches were which as last year. At least this year the onboard screen and automated announcements were switched off and couldn't give wrong station announcements. info re the stations. On the return journey from Bangor to Chester it was two coaches once again and one wonders whether travellers from Prestatyn and Fflint ever manage to get a seat. To summarise, not nearly as bad as last year – arrived on time on the outward journey and about 40 minutes later than hoped on the return. I still

¹ See [Just another train journey - Bangor 2016](#)

² The full route is from Manchester Airport to Llandudno.

struggle to see the value for money – my off-peak return was £75.90 (and that is with a railcard discount)³. Now for the other journeys this year.

East Coast Main Line – Virgin East Coast



I make regular journeys from Durham to Glasgow to visit my mother. Usually I change at Edinburgh Waverley, as the East Coast trains are far more comfortable than the Voyagers used on the Cross Country direct to Glasgow. Depending on my commitments sometimes I buy an off-peak return, at other times an East Coast Advance fares, in first class if the price is right

Most East Coast trains were on time or within a few minutes, and the longest delay to and from Edinburgh about 20 minutes. The new screens which show what proportion of seats are reserved in each coach is helpful (though I know where to find the unreserved seats). The main issue throughout the year has been the level of on-board service which has been declining. Trolley service in standard class north of Newcastle has basically disappeared – and people are more reluctant to use the buffet, not helped by endless security messages. Service in First Class has varied from the

excellent to the poor – on one occasion I was not offered breakfast (when I asked I was told it was because I had no knife and fork - I didn't know I had to bring my own). Hot food later in the day between Edinburgh and Newcastle is a lottery, and staff shortages are mentioned frequently – on one journey the cleaner was helping out by operating the drinks trolley. During the middle of the year I picked up the clear impression that many on board staff were unhappy.

During the year I took four return journeys to London. Five of the eight did not have a trolley in standard class for all or part of the journey. The trains were on time, except one which departed Kings Cross 30 minutes late, due to signalling problems between Edinburgh and Dunbar (i.e. 400 miles away and at least 4 hours earlier). The impression is off the assets being sweated and costs being cut.

³ This was not helped by me buying a Newcastle-Málaga Jet2 flight for £24.70, immediately after buying the rail ticket.

East Coast Main Line - Cross Country

Though I avoid them when I can I have used Cross-country to and from Scotland on a couple of occasions. Station announcers seem finally to have got to grips with which end first-class is at, though maybe I was lucky. For many years it seemed as though no one remembered that many trains reverse at Birmingham. At Durham the station monitors have started saying, for example, that first class is in coaches 1 and 5 – it does help knowing that the 1st and 5th coaches are first class, but unfortunately every passenger reservation shows the coach letter, not the number.

Iv have caught a couple of 4-coach Voyagers where virtually every seat has been reserved which is not a help to someone paying full price at the last minute.

I discovered that the on board screens can only show a maximum number of stations when I boarded the Aberdeen – Penzance train at Edinburgh to discover that the final intermediate station was listed as Bodmin Parkway. After each stop a further station was added – when we left Newcastle the penultimate stop was now Redruth. I appreciate that not many people travel from Stonehaven to St Erth, but it could be confusing to the occasional passenger.

Websites, tickets and machines

Most of my tickets are booked using the Virgin East Coast website. East Coast also operate Durham Station and the staff and ticket machines are theirs. The website has been revamped during the past year – whether or not it is an improvement I will leave up to the individual – it seems to me to take more steps to purchase a ticket, that may just be unfamiliarity. One issue is that you have to select a specific train even when buying an open or off peak return – it is not very clear that the ticket can be used on any other train. If you leave departure until after the specified train can you still collect the ticket from the machine at the station – I haven't tried that yet. Some of the more common railcards for example senior and two together are well down the list of railcards (which is alphabetical) and, I suspect, includes cards which are not valid on any East Coast train. The inane and juvenile language used on the site is similar to that on their ads (there speaks an old fart) and the completion of purchase is marked by exclamation marks congratulating you on being able to accomplish the task, no matter how difficult it is made.

New ticket machines have also appeared and buying from them has the same issues of specifying a train and finding a railcard. The process takes even longer than the previous machines. Admittedly it cannot be easy to design a machine offering all options, when Cross Country and Transpennine offer their own, different fares to stations such as Newcastle, York and Darlington. The machines are often out of order - on one occasion none of the eight were working – this seemed to be a system wide problem and people were being allowed to board with their reference number - but it is not unusual to find the majority out of order, particularly at weekends. On another occasion the machine told me my ticket had already been collected – the staff seemed to be familiar with this issue.

Ticket barriers have been removed from Durham, which makes things easier at rush hours and I have been told that staffing has been reduced. Tickets collected at Durham seem to be unable to operate ticket gates elsewhere – in the final two months of the year I had this problem at Newcastle, Edinburgh, Glasgow Queen St and Bradford Forster Square – whether this is due to fault machines art Durham or because there is no boarding gate to pass through I do not know.

Local journeys – Trans Pennine Express

A long standing issue has been that local journeys between Newcastle and Durham are in the hands of train companies focused on longer distance passengers, with no local government pressure to address the local service. In practice this has been the case since British Rail days. Services from Durham to Newcastle do not start early enough in the morning (particularly on Sundays and for onward connections). The evening service from Newcastle to Durham is irregular, particularly when compared with suburban services from other major cities and finishes early – around 2245 on a weekday and by 2200 on a Saturday.

Trans Pennine Express (TPE) run the final train on a Saturday and it always packed (though what proportion of passengers have paid a fare is unclear – it is easy to avoid. On the occasion I used it this year the train was 10 minutes late leaving Newcastle while passengers tried to squeeze on. It was a physical impossibility to reach the toilets and by Durham there were plenty of passengers who needed to go. Other evening trains on busy weeknights can also be packed.

The pathing of trains is such that the longest gap each hour is followed by the shortest (TPE) train (though I cannot understand why this is the case southbound), which can be full and standing at any of the day. TPE trains usually remain locked until a few minutes before departure from Newcastle leaving passengers to freeze on the platform. The different fares are also issue – I watched a very aggressive TPE conductor insisting that a woman and her young child (standing in the toilet are because the train was packed) to pay again because she had a Cross Country ticket - It was perfectly clear that she wasn't aware of the difference and inward from Durham had simply bought a ticket from the machine for the next train. She paid up, though I advised her next time to apologise and say I'll get off at the next station i.e. Durham.

Otherwise, I managed to avoid TPE, except for a Leeds trip and a couple of York-Scarborough journeys which were fine.

Tyne and Wear Metro

On Tyneside the Tyne and Wear Metro service continues to crumble. It remains the best way to get around, despite being affected by planning and privatisation policies throughout its existence, and the trains are now approaching 40 years old. The daytime Monday to Saturday service is less frequent than the Sunday service was when I arrived in Newcastle in 1985, and the passenger satisfaction figures would be an embarrassment to any main line company. This year I've been affected by delays due to breakdowns, twice on the way to the airport and once heading for the coast. The airport seems to be viewed as an unimportant outpost of the system and trains turned back short at Regent Centre or Kingston Park on a whim. Recovery from problems has seemed to be managed in such a way as to delay the maximum number of passengers in areas unaffected by the breakdown. On the positive side funding for new trains has been announced.

Northern Trains

Despite its location, hardly any Northern trains serve Durham, so I rarely use them. On one trip to Hexham for a walk along Hadrian's Wall the train was delayed en route by 45 minutes, but the Network Rail app, Realtime Trains app and the station screens all assumed it had ran to time. Journeys in Yorkshire – to Bridlington and around Leeds and Bradford were fine and though trains were old staff were helpful. I wasn't travelling at peak periods when I suspect there will be overcrowding.

Scotrail.

I regularly use the Edinburgh – Glasgow Queen Street service and have watched the progress with electrification of the route. Timekeeping was good with one exception due to signalling problems. Allocating suitable units to the service has been a problem (which will be solved once new electric trains start operating in 2018). First class sometimes exists and sometimes doesn't. On six car trains there was often no way of knowing in which half of the train (they are not connected) the trolley would be located. The conductor usually swaps from one half to the other at one of the stations en route. From 10 December there has been the occasional electric train, using existing units, and the difference is noticeable, particularly the acceleration up the slope from Queen Street. My suburban journeys in Glasgow have been fine, though it still amazes me why the line to East Kilbride has never been electrified – I remember proposals in the 70s.

In Scotland this year I've travelled with Ted to Stirling, Inverness and Wick and Inverness Glasgow and led Great Rail Journeys groups to Aviemore, Inverness, Kyle of Lochalsh, Fort-William, Mallaig and Oban. Delays have been minimal, and connections held. Scotrail staff have been extremely helpful dealing with groups of 40 people. On one occasion a busy train had two refreshment trolleys. Service trains to Mallaig will travel slowly or stop on the Glenfinnan Viaduct for tourists to take photos. My only whinge is the rolling stock – due to be replaced by former Intercity 125 short sets on the main lines – but on the scenic routes the comparison with sets used on scenic lines in Switzerland (not just the classic journeys but the 'second-division' lines) is not good.

Finally...

To conclude there were no major traumas, but plenty of minor gripes. I'm trying not to whinge too much, but I'm yet to be convinced that enough is being done to make rail travel attractive and simple for those who rarely use it. Technology (or the people who programme it) seems to cause as many problems as it solves. And at the end of the year Virgin East Coast gets bailed out (I know I'm not meant to use that term) because they overbid, Scotrail, Trans Pennine Express and Northern Trains promised improvements are all running behind schedule. I know much can be laid at the door of the Department for Transport and Network Rail, but the endless promises of jam tomorrow which don't materialise are not helping. Let's see what 2018 brings.

Steve Gillon, January 2018.