

## UK Rail Travel 2018-2020

Plan A was to summarise our experience of train travel in Great Britain during the year 2018. This didn't happen due to other pressures on our time. Plan B was to write a report covering the years 2018 and 2019. We had just drafted the report when coronavirus appeared on the scene and we paused to decide what to do. So this is Plan C. At the time of publishing this page it is over three months since Ted and I have been on a train. Travelling by train in the UK is likely to be substantially different after coronavirus, at least in the short term. This document aims to highlight issues that need improvement to attract people back to the railways, assuming social distancing restrictions can be overcome.

The report is based on our experience of rail travel in 2018 and 2019. During 2018 we made 134 journeys by National Rail trains and 150 in 2019. The franchise we used most often was ScotRail, with 37 and 49 journeys respectively. Second came Virgin Trains East Coast and its successor London North Eastern Railway with 35 journeys in 2018 and 36 journeys in 2019 - this would be first measured by distance travelled. Our most regular journey was Durham to Glasgow, changing at Edinburgh, to visit my mother in her care home, until she passed away at the end of 2019. All other journeys were occasional leisure trips. We start with the three franchises providing the main services through our local station, Durham – Virgin Trains East Coast/ London North Eastern Railway, CrossCountry and TransPennine Express, then work from North to South, from ScotRail to Great Western Railway.

**Virgin Trains East Coast** (EC), a joint venture between Stagecoach (90%) and Virgin (10%) – using the Virgin name due to the quality of the brand (!!)- gave up the franchise in June 2018, and was succeeded by the publicly owned Operator of Last Resort trading as **London North Eastern Railway** (LNER). In our experience quality was visibly declining in the final months of EC, particularly the on-board service, where staff shortages seemed endemic. The scheduled trolley in standard class was missing and/or there was no hot food in first class. Beer was being served in the bottle without a glass (this was after a delay while they searched for a bottle opener) and wine came with plastic tumblers. For a period our regular Edinburgh train was being terminated short at Newcastle, with no information at Durham station or on board the train that this was a truncated Edinburgh service or advice about what Edinburgh bound passengers could do. Those with non-company-specific tickets could use CrossCountry (XC) trains but no information was provided, even when an XC train was a few minutes behind – I had to advise passengers of this.

Issues with LNER trains have been comparatively minor – in their older trains we kept being allocated first class seats which could not be moved to the upright position. The food service has usually been as promised. For several consecutive journeys no credit or debit cards could be accepted on the food trolleys or at buffets. An unusual occasion took place in July 2018 when coach F was out of use and access prohibited. This turned out to be because Theresa May and the cabinet were travelling to a meeting in Newcastle. They were trying appear budget-conscious by travelling standard class, though it did mean that the plebs in coaches A to E couldn't reach the buffet. We have only tried the new Azuma trains on a couple of occasions. They look smart though the livery looks retro, the seats in standard class are hard and there are the usual problems with new trains of lack of luggage space and seats not aligning with windows.

Delays of more than a few minutes were uncommon. A bi-mode diesel-electric Azuma was able to switch to diesel when high winds in the Berwick area led to a speed restriction for electric trains. On one occasion, wires down at Durham led to a diesel shuttle operating between Newcastle and Darlington which was efficiently organised. On another occasion we were transferred to coaches at Northallerton and arrived in Durham 110 minutes late. In general it was handled well except that no-one at Kings Cross seemed to know what was happening and no-one had told Durham taxis that a

replacement bus service had been organised, so none were available when we arrived well after midnight. I normally avoid peak period travel but on one occasion ended up on the 1900 from Kings Cross to Darlington (I knew to avoid it when I travelled the route regularly) and it is still as overcrowded as it was – there were people standing all the way to Darlington.

EC/LNER is responsible for Durham station. Staffing levels have been reduced and the information screen can be wrong (particularly with the coach order of trains). The ticket machines are horrendously difficult and slow to use – when each company has different fares between Durham and Newcastle, Darlington and York it can't be easy to programme them. It is sometimes not possible to buy operator specific tickets for the next train if it is due in a few minutes. Out of order ticket machines are also common, particularly at weekends – once all except 1 of the 8 machines in the station were out of order. On the plus side the new Waiting Room micropub on platform 2 is very welcome.

I generally try to avoid **CrossCountry** (XC) trains between Durham and Scotland, though sometimes they can be more convenient and are useful in case of delays on LNER. We took 18 journeys by XC in 2018 and 20 in 2019. We steer clear of them because of uncomfortable and noisy Voyager trains can have as few as four coaches for long journeys such as Edinburgh – Plymouth. This leads to overcrowding and difficulties in finding a seat, particularly on four coach trains with no unreserved coach B. This can be compounded by seats being available for reservation once the train is en route. The 1700 Glasgow – Durham is a useful train which we would use more if it wasn't so busy (maybe not - I enjoy the opportunity to have a pint in the Halfway House while changing trains at Edinburgh). The only exceptionally bad journey was when a 5 coach train turned up instead of the usual 8 coaches, when the two preceding northbound trains from Durham had been cancelled. On XC journeys elsewhere late departures northbound from York were common due to problems in the Midlands and several journeys in Devon and Cornwall were delayed due to engineering works (and the GWR station monitors gave no information for northbound passengers travelling beyond Bristol). We had a free evening journey from Alnmouth to Durham as the ticket machine (no station staff) was out of order and the conductor didn't come round which suggests that the problem of conductor's machines running out of battery life by evening still exists.

**TransPennine Express** (TPX) is another franchise we try to avoid when travelling from Durham. Pathing constrains mean that the longest gap each hour is before the TPX trains – the shortest and slowest of the lot. This is compounded by cheap advance and walk on fares. Almost all seats on the train can be reserved and overcrowding is common - you may have to stand at any time of the day. In 2018 we took 6 journeys of which 4 were overcrowded and 2 were late. In 2019 I took (or tried to take) 15 journeys of which 4 were overcrowded, 6 were late, 1 was cancelled with no explanation (so I caught a bus from Malton to York) and a Newcastle-bound train (on which I had stood from Manchester Oxford Road to Leeds) was terminated at York without explanation. I noted several other occasions while waiting at Durham that the TPX service was disrupted, late or cancelled. The practice of passengers having to stand on cold, windy platforms at Newcastle until the crew turn up and unlock the doors a few minutes before departure still persists.

We shall see if matters improve with new TPX trains. By accident due to a late LNER train, we caught a new class 68 locomotive and 5 coaches set on its first outing (it was a sunny day in August 2019 and the usual three coach train would have been mobbed) and later in the year began to see 5 coach bi-mode trains calling at Durham looking markedly less crowded than usual. However, I continued to note TPX cancellations on the screens at Durham in January 2020.

The majority of **ScotRail** (SR) journeys were between Edinburgh and Glasgow. This was the period when diesel trains were being gradually replaced by electric trains, initially by temporary stock then

the late-delivered new class 385 trains. This resulted in a few hiccups – it was often impossible to discover which half of the train (they were not connected) the trolley was in and occasionally trains had only three overcrowded coaches. However, timekeeping remained good throughout. The improved acceleration of the new trains was obvious when introduced on the existing timings, arriving early at every station stop. On the new trains the seats are not particularly comfortable and there are fewer toilets, though it is a relatively short journey. The only serious delay was when we were stuck directly behind a class 385 where the brakes had failed – I believe it was the first day it was operating without an engineer from manufacturers Hitachi on board. We arrived Queen Street 75 minutes late, though the conductor kept everyone informed and encouraged people to apply for refunds. There were other delays due to bad weather – Winchburgh tunnel seems to flood as soon as there is heavy rain. With 13 trains an hour between the two cities via five different routes, it's easy to find a way round problems if you are familiar with the system. We travelled via Bathgate several times to avoid delays on the Falkirk High route.

A recurrent problem was the inability of the ticket gates at Edinburgh Waverley and Glasgow Queen St. to accept Durham tickets and having to seek assistance. Plenty of people were in the same situation – it may be because there are no barriers at Durham so the journey appears not to have commenced, though I have heard elsewhere that tickets bought with a railcard can upset the gates. I have begun to use LNER e-tickets on my phone (carrying a printed copy also, such is my faith in new technology), and they have been problem free.

Our other journeys in Scotland were problem free. We had a couple of trips to Cumbrae and Arran and discovered that you can't buy though rail-sea tickets at ticket machines in Glasgow Central, if you have a railcard it may be cheaper to buy separate tickets anyway. Trains are timed to arrive in Largs in time to just miss the Cumbrae Ferry. On suburban journeys we noticed how many stations are still not accessible for the less mobile, Williamwood being one I had to use on several occasions. In January 2020 we used several of SRs short 125 trains, though only the un-refurbished sets so far, which bring increased comfort to some of the Scottish inter-city routes.

**Northern Trains** operate very few trains through Durham – one of them is the last train from Newcastle on a Saturday night. It is enough to put anyone off train travel and we've managed to avoid it for more than two years now. There were no horrors on our six journeys – the Pacer trains were still trundling around, penalty fare areas were expanding at the same time as station staffing was being reduced and none of the promises made at the time of the new franchise were coming to fruition.

In November 2018 we made five journeys by **Merseyrail**, with no problems.

We didn't visit Wales in 2018, so missed the final few months of Arriva Trains Wales. A visit to South Wales in February 2019 included 13 journeys on **Transport for Wales** (TfW) services – 12 local services plus a Manchester – Cardiff journey. These included what will be our final journeys by class 153 single coach trains. Apart from one short delay due to a bridge strike the journeys kept to time. On the Sunday the closure of the main line and bus replacement Newport – Cardiff – Bridgend was handled well by Great Western Railway and TfW. Our only journey along the North Wales coast was by **Virgin West Coast** from Bangor to Chester which was fine, so we didn't have the chance to see whether the local services were still chronically overcrowded.

We made six journeys by **Thameslink** in July 2019. One was 30 minutes late, the others were on time, and the only issue was that four times our tickets were rejected by the ticket gates.

Our single journey on **South Western Railway** went without a hitch, except for the announcement: 'The first 6 coaches are for Exeter. The last 3 coaches are for Bristol. This is a six coach train'.

In 2018 we made 30 journeys by **Great Western Railway** services on visits to Somerset and Wiltshire in May and Devon and Cornwall in September. Engineering work on the GWR main line from London led to delays and diversions on both trips. The introduction of new rolling stock was causing problems and it seemed common for trains not to be formed of the planned stock and for minor glitches on the new trains – these led to delays, missed connections to branch lines further southwest and problems with seat reservations on mainline trains. It was our first experience of the new Hitachi Inter City Express trains and the seats proved as uncomfortable as we had heard.

On the branch lines the stock seemed to be in a state of transition – one never knew what would turn up. On two occasions we joined a train at a request stop through the only door opened by the conductor, who never then came round to sell me a ticket. The local train where the only toilet was out of use had to be the one I caught after I'd had a few pints at lunchtime. Both Plymouth and Exeter stations appeared shabby and run down though some improvement work was underway. A plus was the easy availability of timetables, particularly in Devon and Cornwall. Hopefully, the situation will have settled down and improved.

### **Other railways**

It was not only National Rail services which we used. The most dramatic trip was a treat to ourselves in August 2019 – a first class excursion from Edinburgh to Aberdeen and return hauled by **Tornado**, a steam locomotive built in Darlington in 2008. Despite a late departure due to flooding on the Edinburgh - Glasgow line, everything worked like clockwork, including refilling the loco with water and avoiding delaying service trains.

Our regular journeys on the **Glasgow subway** when visiting the city went without a hitch. Visits to **Edinburgh** included journeys on the **tram** service - the only issue was during the Edinburgh Festival when the service had difficulty coping with traffic congestion and crowds – the trams were packed even late at night. We made almost 40 trips by the **Tyne and Wear Metro**, many of them to and from the Airport. We had only one delay of 15 minutes while another train which had a fault was changed efficiently at Regent Centre. During a strike we took a taxi to the airport – limited services were running and it was clear that staff on the surface could not communicate with staff on the platforms to know when trains were due. I am rarely in **London** these days – the seven **tube** journeys were OK, with the inevitable overcrowding. Destinations included Bank (which we have rarely used) where we found the signage to exits very limited and confusing.

While this may seem like a litany of complaints the majority of journeys were unremarkable and wouldn't be a problem for the occasional user. The main issue is that very often there is something minor wrong, which would be relatively easy to sort out – on long journeys it was rare not to hear an apology for something. To summarise our experience the main issues we found were:

(i) Major **delays** were rare but minor delays are common. It remains the case that, where connections are involved or I have to be somewhere by a specific time, I often catch the train before the one that should get me there on time if everything went well. This is not something I do routinely in any other country - in this period we've travelled by train in Spain, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia.

(ii) When major delays occurred they were generally handled well in terms of getting us to our destination - with diversions or replacement bus services organised quite rapidly and staff stepping

in to maintain services. However, the **communication** with passengers (and to staff on the ground) was often poor and occasionally wrong. Station and onboard monitors and staff could provide contrary information. The occasional traveller could easily feel that no one knew what was happening.

(iii) Where **planned changes** (for example due to engineering work) were in place it was difficult to find information whether printed, online, from staff or station monitors. Much of the information is company specific when many lines have services by more than one company.

(iv) Frequent repetition of scripted or recorded banal **announcements** on board can lead to people not listening when something important is announced. Safety and security messages are necessary but, at some point diminishing returns will set in. Alternatively, the occasional traveller may feel that the railways are a hotbed of criminal activity. Again, the contrast with our European journeys was noticeable.

(v) **Overcrowding** remains an issue - busy trains can often be avoided if you are a frequent traveller, but may surprise occasional travellers, particularly outside peak hours. Overcrowding has remained endemic on XC and TPX, though may be reducing on the latter as new trains are introduced. The companies make matters worse by operating short trains – due to business cases based on dodgy economics and preserving profits and/or Department for Transport (DfT) decisions - and by offering cheaper tickets where other companies share the service (eg between Edinburgh and York). Passengers who turn up and go and pay full fares, sometimes for urgent reasons, are penalised when most seats are reserved for advance ticket holders.

(vi) The range and variety of **fares** for journeys can be confusing and bewildering for the occasional traveller. This complicates purchase online and at station **ticket machines**, which is often not a simple process. Many passengers end up not paying the cheapest fare for their journey. We had to quickly visit the ticket office to pay an excess to increase an operator specific ticket to an open single fare due to misreading the options on the machine – and if we find the machines difficult to use many other people will. Meanwhile peak hour services can be quiet when the first off-peak services are packed, and the different off-peak fare restrictions between companies adds to the confusion.

(vii) And then there is **comfort** – when new trains finally arrive they are often not an improvement on the previous trains. Issues include harder seats, less legroom, fewer tables, less room for luggage, fewer toilets and seats not lining up with windows. While some of these may be acceptable for short commuter journeys it is unacceptable when it applies to new Intercity trains on the East Coast and Great Western mainlines. It seems to have escaped the notice of those in the industry that the comfort of private cars, coaches and buses has increased.

(viii) The impression remains of being promised **jam tomorrow** but tomorrow never comes. When 100% of new trains are delivered and enter service significantly late, with teething problems taking many months to resolve there is a problem somewhere. It appears that complex software is often the issue – maybe builders forget they are not just constructing boxes with wheels. It seems that train builders make unrealistic promises when tendering for trains and that railway companies are daft enough to believe them. Of course it is complicated by the franchising system, involvement (and sometimes non-involvement) of DfT and Network Rail, but that goes beyond the remit of this report so we'll leave it there.

It should be stressed that the vast majority of railway staff we have dealt with have been helpful and I've watched many staff go out of their way to help passengers. How they manage this when sometimes they don't seem to be given the support they deserve from their employers, or respect

from passengers, I don't know. This report has been finalised during the coronavirus pandemic when rail travel dropped by 95% and it is unclear what the long-term effect on the railways will be. With a bit of luck, the current situation will allow time for some serious thinking and action to improve the experience of rail travel, but I'm not counting on it.

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