

How the new London Trains arrived in Harrogate – Issue 2

DIRECT HARROGATE –LONDON SERVICES

The Harrogate Line Supporters Group was set up in 2011 with the aim of improving rail services in the Harrogate District.

It was established by Harrogate Chamber of Trade and Commerce, whose members were concerned that poor local and national rail links were impacting on the success and growth of businesses in the area. The Chamber had been discussing the issue and lobbying for improvements since 2008, but felt more could be done to focus attention on rail services.

With the district's economy heavily reliant on the tourism and conference industries, drastic improvements were needed.

Although set up by the Chamber's Chief Executive Brian Dunsby, the Harrogate Line Supporters Group (HLSG) welcomed members from all backgrounds, not just those involved in local businesses. It had two main aims: to significantly improve the Leeds-Harrogate-York line, and to reintroduce direct services between London and Harrogate. The Group now has over 200 members.

After significant campaigning, including direct discussions with the DfT and the ORR, and then with East Coast Trains after they took over the East Coast mainline in late 2009. The first positive step was achieved in January 2011, when an evening return direct service from Kings Cross to Harrogate was announced. Four months later, the first service from London arrived in Harrogate to much fanfare from the Chamber, HLSG, Andrew Jones MP, local councillors and many other groups in the community. Harrogate in Bloom even handed out white Yorkshire roses to passengers arriving on the first service from the capital, and there was plenty of Yorkshire Tea and Bettys biscuits to go around.

Praise for the Chamber's work came from all quarters: local businesses, the tourism industry, Harrogate Borough Council and East Coast itself, who thanked Brian for the effective campaign spearheaded by the Chamber and HLSG.

This was the first new service to Harrogate for 25 years – but the campaigners had no intention of stopping there. With one direct return service to the capital in place, they began campaigning for more: they hoped to achieve two direct services between Harrogate and Kings Cross in each direction within the following two years, rising to seven by 2016. However whilst the service was shown to be technically possible and probably viable, there were simply no spare Class 43 diesel engines to operate and extra services on the non-electrified parts of the East Coast mainline.

Since the announcement of the shortlisted bidders for the East Coast franchise in January 2014, HLSG has been meeting with all of the companies involved in order to press the case for more direct services between Harrogate and London. Each of the bidders was receptive to the proposal, looking with interest at the amount of research and the strength of the evidence to show the positive impact these changes could have.

The announcement of Virgin-Stagecoach as the winning bidder has been welcomed by HLSG and the Chamber – particularly because the group immediately confirmed its plans to introduce six additional services between London and Harrogate each day, bringing the total to seven, which equates to a two-hourly service during operating hours. This will include an earlier service to London every morning.

This recent announcement of the seven direct services to be introduced by the Virgin-Stagecoach consortium means that the middle step of the Chamber's campaign has been skipped and the final goal should be reached with the new IEP trains by 2019. This is the direct outcome that the team have spent many hours working towards as their goal over the past five years.

LOCAL SERVICES – LEEDS-HARROGATE-YORK

With such progress being made to bring better links to Harrogate around the country, the state of the local trains could not be ignored. While people still had to change trains at either Leeds or York in order to reach Harrogate, they were transferring to old-fashioned rolling stock on the Harrogate line. The Chamber knew from its own members and their contacts that this was extremely off-putting to those travelling to the area, and was creating problems for business people in the district who needed to access onward rail and air links via Leeds or York.

The group brought in a voluntary rail adviser, Mark Leving – a former managing director of Hull Trains with extensive experience in the rail industry – to help put together a realistic package of proposals for improvements to services on the Harrogate line.

This resulted in the creation of a proposal for line electrification, which would not only bring in more modern rolling stock but would also allow for a much more frequent service along the line – and potentially the creation of new stations. Sites put forward included a ‘parkway’ halt just a mile from Leeds Bradford Airport, and one near Flaxby which would serve the proposed new business park.

After an intensive series of meetings and presentations, the plans were backed by Andrew Jones MP, North Yorkshire County Council, Harrogate Borough Council, City of York Chief Executive and Leeds City Council Chief Executive, as well as many individuals and businesses around the district. The membership of HLSG swelled, and the Chamber gave regular updates on the progress through its monthly meetings and newsletter. These were also summarised nationwide in the RailFuture bulletins and newsletters.

In February 2013, the Government requested a detailed technical study and a business case showing the benefits electrification could bring. North Yorkshire County Council appointed WSP to create an official business case, which on completion in October 2013 showed a benefit-cost ratio of 3.61. With the Department for Transport interested in anything above 2, it seemed the case for the Harrogate line was very strong.

That was confirmed in January 2014, when the Harrogate line was one of eight passed to a new Electrification Taskforce set up by the Government to prioritise future investment. In more good news for the area, it was then confirmed that the taskforce would be chaired by Andrew Jones, MP for Harrogate and Knaresborough.

The Task Force finally presented their report entitled “Northern Sparks” to the Secretary of State on 5th March 2015, in which the Harrogate Line was included in the Tier One group of 12 lines recommended for electrification based primarily on the scale of economic impact they will bring. The Task Force said “*the schemes identified in Tier One should be taken forward urgently through a full business case analysis so that they can be properly considered in the funding cycle for the next Control Period 2019-2024. The Task Force recommended that this preparatory work is considered for immediate funding in the 2015-16 financial year.*”

As the Business Case for the Harrogate Line was already prepared in the manner specified by the DfT we are hopeful that it will come out near the top of the priority list for funding. This will in turn bring forward the required investment in re-signalling the Harrogate to York section and restoring the double track between Knaresborough and Cattal. That should enable construction of a new station at Flaxby Moor to serve Flaxby Green Park and the proposed new large-scale housing development.