

Journeys by rail, coach and bus in the East Midlands

Background

It is an often-lamented historical fact that, in the railway closures of the 1950's and 60's, the possibilities for cross-country rail travel were very considerably reduced. Nowhere was this more the case than in the East Midlands, where nearly all the lines that formed interconnecting links between the main lines radiating out from London were closed. Indeed the only one that remains is the Bedford to Bletchley line and its (mothballed) freight only Oxford extension. Many of these lines were "replaced" by bus services, but these were generally operated as local bus routes, and disappeared from national timetables. There were some interesting historical oddities that persisted over a number of years – for example the United Counties Northampton-Oxford bus 128 continued to terminate at Cambridge Railway Station, one and a half miles from the city centre until well into the 1980's, presumably because it was a direct replacement for a former train service. However in more recent years, some bus and coach links in this area have started to appear in the national rail timetable, in both printed and on-line form.

Now, in early 2004, I have had occasion to travel between Birmingham and various East Midlands locations in the course of a number of convoluted circular journeys. If one approached this in a rational way, it would be very quickly realised that these journeys are probably not sensibly made by public transport. However, putting rationality to one side, I decided to sample some of the current rail link coaches during the course of these trips. In this short article, I will describe my experiences and make some comments about how these transport links could be improved.

Milton Keynes to Luton and Luton Airport

I arrived in Milton Keynes with a ticket to Luton issued at Birmingham New Street. On coming onto the concourse at Milton Keynes, the coach links to both Luton and Oxford were displayed on the departures screen, which was somewhat encouraging. However problems arose when I left the station building to try to find the Luton service. The coach stop was far from obvious, and I was fortunate in travelling on a warm day. On a windy winter morning it would not have been a pleasant place to wait. Nonetheless my choice of stop was confirmed when a large coach bearing the Virgin logo and proclaiming its' route in large letters pulled into the bay. The next problem was that the driver refused to accept my ticket as it should, apparently, have indicated that I was travelling on the bus link. Presumably the ticket I had was only valid for travel via Leicester! So I paid my fare, and took a seat on a very comfortable modern coach. The passengers getting on after me were however not so fortunate, as the driver didn't have enough change and they had to run to the buffet at the station to change a large denomination note. But in the end the passengers were all settled, and the coach left a few minutes after the booked time. The journey was extremely comfortable and trouble free – certainly the quality was on a par with many multiple unit trips I have experienced. The final difficulty was that the driver forgot to drop me off at Luton station, and if I hadn't been vaguely aware of the geography of the town I would probably have ended up at the airport. I still had a walk of a couple of hundred

yards back to the station. So my experience was mixed – a very comfortable journey, but with lots of hassle at either end.

My second journey, or rather attempted journey, was less pleasant, in that I never made the coach at all. I was on my way from Birmingham to Luton Airport for an evening flight and, not unusually the train was around 20 to 25 minutes late at Milton Keynes and I missed the coach connection by just a few minutes. To wait an hour for the next would have resulted in difficulties at the airport with check in times missed etc, and the same was clearly true for a handful of other passengers. Nonetheless the staff at Milton Keynes were helpful, and a taxi was provided that got us all to the airport on time. This would not have been necessary however if the coach had been held for a few minutes at Milton Keynes – but there seems to have been no communication between train and coach operators.

Oxford to Milton Keynes

Again the first difficulty was in locating the stop for this coach at Oxford station. I had found the details of the journey on the Trainline, but there was little indication of the existence of the service at Oxford Railway Station. A thorough search of the various bus and coach stops revealed that the Stagecoach Express service X5 to Milton Keynes, Bedford and Cambridge left at the same time, so I made the assumption that this was the service I was after. It seems that an existing service has been rebranded as a rail link coach on the on-line timetable. Again, whilst the shelter was adequate, it would not have been a pleasant place to wait in inclement weather. The shelter seemed to be in a different world to the spacious and comfortable concourse of Oxford station just behind me. The coach duly arrived on time, and I boarded and paid my fare with no problem. The journey itself was again comfortable and of a standard of multiple unit travel. Arrival at Milton Keynes railway station was on time. There I found, after a bit of a search, timetables produced by Virgin giving reasonably clear details of the Milton Keynes – Luton Airport and Oxford – Milton Keynes – Bedford – Cambridge services under the brand name “Raillinks”. These identified the Oxford – Cambridge service as being operated by Stagecoach. It would have been useful if this information had been available on the web. This coach service is displayed on the arrival and departure boards on the concourse of Milton Keynes Station, although the fact that even services running 10 minutes late were displayed as leaving on time leads me to suspect that there is no direct link to service running information.

Bedford to Milton Keynes

By the time I travelled from Bedford to Milton Keynes I was aware that I had to look out for Stagecoach X5. This does not stop at Bedford Railway Station, but only at the Bus Station. Whilst Bedford Bus Station is not bad as bus stations go, it is rather scruffy, with very poor information services. I arrived at the indicated bay, only to find it occupied by a Stagecoach service to Luton. The coach I required arrived 10 minutes late, and parked two bays away, to the obvious confusion of waiting passengers. Boarding was slow, and led to another 10 minutes delay. But yet again the journey was comfortable, cheap and fast. For the first time I was exposed to the wonders of Milton Keynes Coachway, just off the M1, which, at least from the

comfortable interior of the coach, seems to set new standards in the lack of passenger facilities. Arrival at Milton Keynes Railway Station was only ten minutes late.

Northampton to Bedford

This trip was made by Stagecoach Express service X2, which is not a rail link service in any way. Indeed it starts from Greyfriars Bus Station, which is in reasonable shape considering it is part of what looks like a typically 1960's concrete construction. It would probably be best if it went the way of one of its peers – the Bullring in Birmingham – that is to be reduced to rubble, and something more appropriate to the 21st century constructed. The service was operated by a standard double deck coach, and had the feel of a country bus service. The view over Northamptonshire from the top deck was magnificent, but the overall standard of comfort was what one would expect from such a service – rather poor. This being said it arrived on time, and for the journey on which I was engaged it suited my purposes quite well.

Observations

The small number of trips described above can hardly be thought of as a properly conducted survey of the various rail link coaches in the East Midlands. Nonetheless they do allow me to make a number of general observations. Firstly the standard of the journeys themselves was generally high – the product is a good one that is worth selling. But the major weakness lies in the area of interchange with national rail, facilities at termini and the level of information that is given. If these are really rail link services, they need to service those stations en route they are reasonably accessible – for example calling at Bedford Midland station as well as Bedford Bus station. Also I feel that the operators of such services simply do not realise that the overall level of comfort and security found at railway stations is of importance to passengers, and to have these rail link services begin at draughty bus shelters, someway removed from the information and refreshment facilities at station concourses will do nothing to encourage passengers to use them. The provision of terminal facilities for such services does not really seem to have been considered. Where this has been done (for example in the Heathrow link from Reading) the level of passenger security and satisfaction is far higher – even if the departure lounge at Reading is rather tacky. Similarly the general ambience of stops en route need to be improved. Even the lowliest of railway stations offers an area where waiting passengers can at least sit down, without having to cope with crowds of other folk going about their business between their seat and the edge of the platform. Waiting at roadside bus stops, with the ordinary activity of life going on around, is a much less pleasant experience. Then finally publicity and information is clearly important. To have an indication of who the operators of the service are when booking would help to find the service at railway stations, and a better level of publicity of these services outside the immediate area may well increase passenger levels. If nothing else it may alert ticket issuing staff at Birmingham to different journey possibilities! These services also need to be included on departure screens wherever possible (and departure screens provided at bus platforms as well as train platforms), ideally with an indication of late running. This is achievable. On a recent holiday in North Wales I was amazed to find at a bus stop in Criccieth, an electronic system that told me when the bus I wished to Porthmadog was due to arrive and that it was running a few minutes late. And this on a Sunday afternoon when only the insane would consider

travelling on most main line rail routes. Perhaps a dialogue of bus and train operating companies with local authorities to improve passenger facilities could be constructive.

These ideas lead me on to some considerations for the future. Clearly the Stagecoach X5 route has been incorporated into the national timetable. However Stagecoach also run a number of other similar services across this area (Oxford to Northampton, Northampton to Peterborough etc), and these could similarly be included – with all the provisos re terminal provision made above. Such a network would go some way towards the restoration of the services cut four or five decades ago. Finally it seems to me that some of the same ideas for passenger facilities and information should be considered when providing replacement bus or coach services during planned railway engineering work, or when services are disrupted for whatever reason. I say this with some feeling. My major experience with such services is at Birmingham New Street. There the buses and coaches wait outside the front of the station, with passenger access along a narrow pavement between the buses and a concrete wall, with no information system other than shouting station staff and coach drivers. The resulting confusion and quality of the travel experience is appalling. As New Street is often used for such services, both planned and unplanned, it does not seem unreasonable that a specifically planned and engineered area should be constructed for buses and coaches during such events, with proper passenger facilities. For me at the moment however, any indication of replacement bus and coach services being provided leads me immediately to the taxi rank!