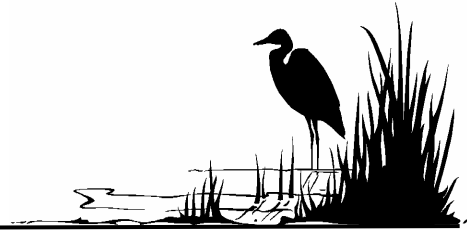


BARKING-GOSPEL OAK LINE USER GROUP

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ANOTHER OVERCROWDING CRISIS

LONDON OVERGROUND FAILS THE FIRST TEST?

The news that Transport for London (TfL) were to be given responsibility for the former Silverlink Metro services caused great cheer to the Barking-Gospel Oak Line User Group (BGOLUG). TfL had shown an understanding of the demand for passenger capacity on the route by funding additional services. In addition to the winter Sunday service and some late evening services, TfL funded three extra peak trains to relieve overcrowding from 12th December 2005 and a peak 20-minute frequency service from 12th June 2006. These trains only eased the overcrowding, it now becoming clear that the latent passenger demand for the route was such that as new capacity was provided it was quickly filled. This has been confirmed by the fact that just over a year following the introduction of the peak 20-minute frequency service, peak trains were again seriously overcrowded. The decline in reliability as the Silverlink era drew to a close causing large numbers of passengers to be left behind at stations by the next train following a cancellation and again stories being told of passengers deserting the service in the mornings in favour of a longer, but more reliable bus journey.

BGOLUG expected TfL to continue to meet the increased passenger demand. However early hopes that an all day 20-minute frequency would soon be adopted were dashed as plans for London Overground solidified during 2007. While the acceptance of Oyster prepay and the reintroduction of station staff were welcome, apart from more weekend trains there were no plans to enhance weekday passenger capacity until December 2009. Even this proposal was problematic since the TfL proposal for December 2009 consisted of a Monday to Saturday 15-minute frequency of new trains, but still formed of only 2 coaches.

BGOLUG protested at the lack of plans to deal with weekday peak overcrowding. In early October 2007, it submitted a stop-gap plan for a one hour peak 15-minute frequency service and pointed out the once London Overground was released from its commitment to provide two trains for London Midland's Bedford-Bletchley service, there would be 8xClass 150s available for a longer 15-minute frequency operation on the Barking-Gospel Oak Route. In this, BGOLUG was supported by London TravelWatch. BGOLUG also demanded that the new trains be formed of at least 3 coaches. TfL responded that the new Class 172 *Turbostar* DMUs would be formed of coaches 3 metres longer than the current Class 150 *Sprinters* and they were confident that two of these longer coaches would have sufficient capacity.

In early November came news from London Overground Rail Operations Ltd (LOROL), TfL's chosen contractor, that they were reducing the size of the Class 150 *Sprinter* DMU fleet from 8 units to 6, since London Midland no longer wished to enforce the requirement that LOROL supply two trains for the Bedford-Bletchley service. BGOLUG immediately called upon TfL to retain the 2 units LOROL was intending to return to Angel Trains, the leasing company, and was again supported in this by London TravelWatch.

Within two weeks *Modern Railways* magazine was reporting that firm orders for the Class 172 *Turbostars* had yet to be agreed with manufacturer Bombardier, causing the delivery of these trains to be delayed by at least six months, possibly a year. There was also news that 2xClass 150s from the LOROL fleet had been transferred to First Great Western at Bristol.

BGOLUG is dismayed at the current position. TfL, which in the past two years has shown such foresight in funding increases in passenger capacity to match the demand on the Barking-Gospel Oak route and was clearly intent in allowing this route to play its full part in the transport network of north and east London, is now without any plan to deal with the serious overcrowding on the route's peak services.

TfL has launched London Overground in a huge blaze of publicity, with press adverts, photo opportunities with the Mayor and included the network on the Tube Map. TfL has also made it easier for residents and commuters to use the route by accepting Oyster prepay. Yet all these potential new passengers will find, if they attempt to take advantage of the hitherto "secret railway", are peak period trains that they cannot board because they are already crush loaded.

LIMITED SOLUTIONS

The only demand management tool now available is the physical restriction of passenger capacity which will spread disillusionment with the London Overground concept and the London Mayor with whom TfL is inextricably linked.

While this should be unacceptable to TfL, it is certainly unacceptable to BGOLUG as the representative of the route's passengers. Attached (Tables 1 & 2) are proposals for an all day Monday to Saturday 20-minute service which should be introduced at the 18th May 2008 timetable change. This would require 4xunits and LOROL has assured BGOLUG that with 6 sets it will have no problem providing 4 trains for traffic daily. During BGOLUG's recent leafleting exercise several requests were received for trains to start earlier in the morning and this has been reflected in the 06:00 start in Table 1. The service finishes as detailed in Table 2 at 23:20 from Gospel Oak and 23:40 from Barking. This would require a small relaxation in Network Rail's *Rules of the Route* by about half an hour to 00:35.

In view of LOROL's confidence in improved Class 150 availability, it is further proposed that a 5th unit be diagrammed for traffic during Monday to Friday peak periods to provide a 15-minute frequency service, again shown in Tables 1 & 2. This 15-minute frequency service should be introduced as quickly as possible and can easily be integrated into the current morning timetable. As previously stated the uneven intervals of the early trains in the current timetable causes heavy loadings on the current 07:20 from Barking and it is hoped that the earlier services might relieve the loadings on this train. The 15-minute interval morning westbound service should provide some limited but welcome relief for passengers using the current services.

The weekday evening 15-minute peak service could be introduced before 18th May 2008 by inserting it after the current 16:55 from Gospel Oak but loadings on eastbound evening services are not quite as critical and this could be postponed until the May 2008 timetable change.

In order to comply with the current Network Rail *Rules of the Plan*, freight trains would have to be banned from the Barking-Gospel Oak Route while the 15-minute frequency service was in operation.

BGOLUG sees the early introduction of a Monday to Saturday 20-minute frequency service with a limited Monday to Friday peak-hour 15-minute frequency service as essential if the promise of the London Overground is to have any real meaning to the route's passengers.

BGOLUG has serious concerns that this proposed improved peak train service may again be seriously overcrowded before the delivery of the new DMUs is possible, but unless there is an unexpected easing in the current rolling-stock shortage, there is little chance of strengthening the current 2-car units. BGOLUG cannot stress too strongly that new rolling stock for this route **must** be formed of at least 3-car units, preferably electrically powered and part of a through Barking-Clapham Junction service.
