

Portsmouth Society News

Special Report - Autumn 2007

The case for removing South West Trains' cramped Suburban-style units from London-Portsmouth Main Line Services

The Background

The campaign continues - to restore a respectable standard of accommodation on Main Line services operated by South West Trains between London (Waterloo) and Portsmouth Harbour. When Stagecoach had its franchise renewed by the DfT in autumn 2006, it was an expensive deal, one that effectively placed South West Trains in the position of stealth tax collector for the government. To fulfil its guarantee to the Treasury, while providing a handsome return for Stagecoach shareholders, economies were an essential part of the deal. Passengers travelling between Portsmouth and London (Waterloo) suffered the consequences of these economies immediately, the deployment of the blue-painted Class 450 units on 'fast' services imposing a severe loss of amenity.



A Class 450 "blue" train at Woking



Standard class seat in a class 450 (blue) train. Just 17.5 inches wide with no space between seats, no arm rests, no tables. OK for short journeys but unsuitable for Portsmouth - London trains.

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This inappropriate use of Class 450 units on the Portsmouth Main Line is the direct result of a rolling stock cascade, one that has seen the withdrawal from service of Bournemouth's 24 iconic Class 442 units (these elegant units worked some Portsmouth services for about a decade). The reason promulgated at the time by South West Trains for the rolling stock changes was entirely spurious, undisclosed leasing charges being the determining factor. Originally, it had been intended to dispose of the 30 troublesome Class 458 units, these having been acquired about 7 years ago, principally for services between Reading and London (Waterloo). By 2004, virtually all Class 458 units had been withdrawn from service and put into store, as a consequence of their unreliability.

Prior to the franchise renewal, a further batch of 17 Class 450 units had been ordered, effectively as replacements for Class 458 on Reading services. These units were coming on line at about the time Stagecoach won its renewed franchise, after which there followed a quite remarkable volte face in the pursuit of economies. Class 458 was reprieved for further use on Reading services, allegedly at a more favourable leasing charge, despite its record of unreliability. It was this move that resulted in the stock cascade, from which we have since been suffering. Class 450 units displaced from Reading services were transferred to the Portsmouth Main Line, releasing, in turn, most of Portsmouth's own dedicated squadron of white-painted Class 444 Main Line units for use on the Bournemouth line. This completed the cascade, allowing South West Trains to withdraw all 24 units of Class 442, an act of unimaginable ineptitude and one entirely in defiance of public acclaim.



A "Wessex" train (class 442) now withdrawn from SWT but soon to appear on Gatwick Express

The Present Situation

South West Trains has since faced a campaign of considerable hostility, principally from Portsmouth line passengers. David Habershon, of Emsworth, courageously formed the 'No 450' campaign and has, to date, enlisted over 1,300 signatories (visit www.no450.co.uk). He has worked tirelessly in pursuit of a worthy goal, viz. to have restored to the Portsmouth line its allocation of Class 444 units, as delivered to us in 2004. There have been meetings with South West Trains managers and interviews in the media – The News, in particular, has strongly pledged its support. Most recently, on Tuesday,

18 September, David Habershon presented a most scholarly Brief to Havant Borough Council Environmental & Community Board, outlining in every detail the case against South West Trains. He has that Council's support. The Board endorsed the aim 'to restore proper Mine Line trains'. Nearer to home, John Holland and I have been pursuing things with our own local representatives. On 19 January, we, together with Roger James, met Michael Hancock M.P. to outline the case. On 31 January, John Holland and I met Gerald Vernon-Jackson, the Council Leader, to brief him on the issues, prior to his meeting in London with South West Trains management - when he was to be accompanied by Councillor Alex Bentley.

Correspondence with South West Trains management has become increasingly fraught, to the point where they now refuse to answer letters – from me, from David Habershon and, presumably, from anyone else whom they classify as a nuisance. I have since been pursuing the matter, on a personal basis, with Cllr. Michael Andrewes at Michael Hancock's 1A Albert Road premises. In response to persistence, a very long letter was recently sent to South West Trains general manager, Stewart Palmer, signed by Michael Hancock – for which we are all immensely grateful. It outlines all the issues, complementing David Habershon's Brief most usefully. We await the response to this with great interest.

Insult to Passengers

South West Trains cannot be allowed to get away with acting as they have towards passengers on the Main Line to Portsmouth. We have been insulted and, more seriously, we have been fed a diet of untruths by South West Trains - in a desperate attempt to justify indefensible action. Portsmouth is *not* an outer suburban terminus, yet Class 450, with its Spartan provision, is no more than outer suburban *in design* – cramped 3+2 seating, no armrests, no tables and awkward leg-room (in facing seats and those adjacent to windows). By contrast, Class 444 has 2+2 seating, armrests, a useful number of tables and unrestricted leg-room. The contrast could not be more striking. On week-days, there are various hours in the day when there is *no* Class 444 service available. On Saturdays, all services via Haslemere are formed of Class 450, while stopping services, via Eastleigh are, inexplicably, operated by the superior Class 444. On Sundays, again inexplicably, stopping services via Haslemere receive Class 444, while miserable Class 450 units are put on the 'fast' services. Such arrangements are imbecilic. Meanwhile, Southampton gets three Class 444 services per hour nearly all the time – Weymouth, Poole and the shuttle – while Portsmouth suffers relegation to suburban status.

'Overcrowding' – The Facts

South West Trains, in defending the indefensible, claim 'overcrowding' as the reason for the changes. This is a lie. There is no 'overcrowding' on the Portsmouth Main Line. Trains are certainly well used during the brief peak periods, morning and evening, with some people *choosing* to stand - but the alleged excessive numbers upon which South West Trains bases its case affect only the Main Line as far as Woking, principally. And, of course, the Main Line between Woking and Waterloo is served by 13 services per hour - or one every 5 minutes -

including Bournemouth and Exeter line trains *as well as* those to Portsmouth. Using Portsmouth services as the target for alleged 'overcrowding' is therefore entirely baseless. Indeed, it is shamefully dishonest. What is more, in its flawed defence, South West Trains conveniently cites *only* peak periods to justify the changes. This is entirely misleading, inasmuch as it specifically disregards the pattern of services throughout the day, about 90% of timetabled services being non-peak.



A Class 444 (white) train, new to Portsmouth in 2004 but now mainly found on the Bournemouth line.

Spiralling Ticket Prices

In the matter of fare structures, the recent banding, introduced by South West Trains, is a money-grabbing exercise, plain and simple – again a veritable necessity in response to the exceptional financial demands underwritten in the franchise. The opportunity to travel to London at a reasonable cost (to arrive in the capital just after 1000) is now denied to passengers, largely a captive clientele, as Stagecoach exploits its abominable monopoly to maximum effect, action sanctioned by the DfT in the renewed franchise. South West Trains claim, disingenuously, to be acting in the public interest, spreading the load - as they quaintly put it, with characteristic impunity.

The Alternative

Happily, there is an escape for Portsmouth passengers, for those prepared to spend a little more time in transit. Southern, part of the Go Ahead Group, operates services to London (Victoria) from Portsmouth. They take longer, travelling 87 miles end-to-end, in contrast with South West Trains 74 miles. Nevertheless, one can still arrive in London just after 1000, at no extra cost, whereas South West Trains offer their cheaper rate only on trains arriving in London after 1200. For those with a Senior Card in 2007, a Travelcard Day Return by Southern – leaving, say, Fratton at 0758 – costs £14.50. The best South West Trains can do is £22.60 to arrive between 1000 and 1200 or £19.40 to arrive after 1200. No contest! And, what's more, Southern operate the excellent Electrostar Class 377 units, guaranteeing 2+2 seating, armrests and tables in the outer coaches of each unit, with only the two internal vehicles having the less attractive 3+2 seating. Again, no contest! For ordinary fares and those with the Network Card, the differentials are less generous – but going with Southern is, in itself, an experience to be enjoyed. The abominable Class 450 units and their less inferior companions of Class 444 were constructed in Austria and Germany while, all Southern's Electrostar units were constructed in England. *Not* that this, in itself, should influence one's view!

Who Owns the Railway?

As a final thought, it must be remembered that neither South West Trains nor the government owns the railway. This vital public service belongs to the community - and in particular the passengers who buy tickets and use it. Passenger views *must* be given more priority and this point is made in the *House of Commons Transport Select Committee Report on Passenger Franchising (2005-2006)*. The report specifically recommends that passenger consultation should be enshrined in law, a clause which both the DfT and S.W.T. have studiously chosen to ignore.

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