

Morpeth - Ipswich - Penzance - Morpeth

In an itinerary including Northern, LNER, Greater Anglia, London Underground, GWR, Flybe and Nexus Metro, SENRUG Chair Dennis Fancett notices the good and the bad of the different train companies involved.

Wednesday 7th November 2018 (Morpeth - Ipswich)

Our journey started on the 13:52 Northern train from Morpeth, which arrived at Newcastle on time, giving us a 40-minute wait at Newcastle for the 14:59 to London.

3 months ago, when I first booked the tickets, LNER had emailed me wifi codes for their trains but alas that email had long disappeared from my phone. A few days before the journey, LNER start spamming me with all sorts of unwanted information about my destination - bars, clubs and restaurants etc, but whilst these messages might be helpful for anyone who wants to be treated like a teenager (for this is the language that LNER use) the one important thing which is really needed - a reminder of those precious wifi codes - is sadly absent.

The LNER train was fast from York so we needed to change again at York for a stopping service immediately behind. It is only an 8-minute change at York, which I thought would be challenging if we had to cross the footbridge. In fact, our LNER service was 10 minutes or so late arriving into York, but an announcement told us the connection would be held for us. That's not quite as benevolent as it sounds since it would not have been in LNER's interest to let the stopping service depart on time as the fast service would not be able to overtake it and would be hopelessly delayed by the time it got to London.

At York, our connecting LNER train was waiting on the facing platform so the change was really very easy. However, by the time the fast train had left, the delay on our stopping train was about 10 minutes too. This increased as we got further south; we were due at Peterborough at 17:28 with the Ipswich service leaving at 17:50. It was just on 17:50 when we arrived at Peterborough so we joined 30 or so passengers for a mad sprint over the footbridge which we made just in time, though the Ipswich train was then itself delayed for a few more minutes due to undefined technical difficulties.

Spare a thought however for the hapless Norwich passengers who had missed their connection on to the 17:44 East Midlands service. They were told to join our train too and change at Ely. But why? All they could do there was wait an hour for the next train from Peterborough. That mad rush over the footbridge, people puffing and panting, all for nothing. A leisurely stroll via the coffee shop would have been better advice. That's bad advice from LNER's station staff at Peterborough. I've often noticed that train companies default to getting passengers off my station - move them along the line to somewhere else and let them be someone else's problem. Let's hope they had a buffet or something at Ely else I should think they would have been really cross to leave behind those welcoming facilities at Peterborough. Admittedly, our Greater Anglia Conductor told them there was an alternative option of changing at Stowmarket which would technically deliver them to Norwich 6 minutes earlier than the hour wait at Ely. "But", he cautioned, "I don't advise it. If there is any further delay to this train, or if the Stowmarket - Norwich train is cancelled,

you'll be stranded at Stowmarket station for hours". Taking his advice on board, our Norwich-bound companions left us at Ely and we continued on to Ipswich, arriving just a few minutes after the scheduled 19:28.

Friday 9th November (Ipswich - Penzance)

Today we travelled from Ipswich to Penzance. We left Ipswich on the first off-peak train at 09:43, and decided to take breakfast at one of the station take-away food outlets. The choice was excellent, with a seating area including settees and a complimentary drinking water fountain allowing plastic water bottles to be re-filled, and I noted Ipswich had won the Major Station of the Year award, which I felt was well deserved.

I was tempted to split-ticket today's travel as I would have been interested in travelling first-class with GWR, having a nice lunch as we sped along the Dawlish sea wall, but saw no merit in paying for first class on the GWR leg. But I decided the risk of a missed connection, with just an hour to get from Liverpool Street to Paddington, was too great - so it was standard all the way but with the security of knowing I was covered in the event of any late running or incident on the London Underground.

Through tickets from Ipswich to Penzance should be valid for the London Underground connection, so I hopefully offered ours to the automatic ticket machine and indeed they were accepted, but there is nothing whatsoever on the ticket to tell you this is the case. I wonder how many passengers have paid twice needlessly? The transport authorities need to be careful in case those companies that help people with PPI claims from banks turn their attention to "did you pay twice for your underground journey" once the PPI claim window closes in a few months' time.

The journey to Liverpool Street was uneventful though we arrived 10 minutes or so late. We were a little anxious that the hour in our itinerary to cross to Paddington would be sufficient, and our anxiety increased when poor signage at Liverpool Street initially sent us onto the wrong direction platform for the Circle Line, but we nevertheless arrived at Paddington's Hammersmith & City platform with plenty of time to spare.

With time to kill, I asked at the Ticket Office for the price of an on the day upgrade to first-class - alas the answer dictated my acceptance that standard would not be so bad. We chose to get a coffee at the station then sauntered onto the platform to board our train, which I noted was one of GWR's new Hitachi trains, soon to be launched on the East Coast line under LNER's brand name of Azuma.

I was impressed with the new Hitachi train. The seats were comfortable and the acceleration smooth, with lots of hi-tech stuff on board, charging points and wifi. Just one design fault I could see was in the toilets where the water tap for hand washing was too close to the edge of the sink, sending the water directly on to the train floor, particularly when the train is swaying at speed, not a nice experience for the next passenger.

However, no amount of efficient design and hi-tech goodies can overcome management failings. We left Paddington at 12:03 and were due into Penzance at 17:09, and so, around 1 pm I went in search of the catering trolley to buy a sandwich. There wasn't one. It transpired food had not been loaded onto the train because the platform at Paddington

had been too congested. Really? It wasn't that busy when we had walked through. What is GWR's strategy for morning and evening peak hour departures when the platform really would be busy? In terms of the school "I haven't done my homework because ..." excuses, this one really did lack both plausibility and ingenuity. The platform had not been unduly congested when we had passed through.

If only GWR had announced to waiting passengers at Paddington there would be no food on the train for standard class passengers, we would all have had time to visit one of the take-away outlets and buy something. Instead, a very uncomfortable 5-hour journey lay ahead.

We were told more food would be taken on board at Plymouth. Why not Exeter I wondered, which we would reach first? Or even Reading? My wife needed to take some tablets which had to be taken "with food" so after Plymouth, I went off again in search of the trolley. Alas - the new Hitachi train is 2 5-car sets coupled together, with no walk-through capability in between. And sadly, the trolley was in the other unit, so still no food for us.

By this time my wife was in some distress, and I found a group of GWR staff - whose purpose on the train would shortly be revealed - and expressed my concern, though I knew even they could not magic up a stocked catering trolley from thin air, or whisk it in from the other half of the train. But one of these staff members quietly suggested I walked through the first-class section of the train to the train manager's office, as the Train Manager might have a solution. Slightly embarrassed at walking into the first-class section with only a standard ticket, I nevertheless did as suggest. After listening to my concern, the Train Manager offered me a sandwich from the first-class stock which was gratefully accepted. I offered to pay but he refused payment saying it was complimentary. He is to be complimented for his sensitivity and response to what was becoming a difficult situation for us. But, if it wasn't for these extra GWR staff on the train, standard class passengers would not know where or how to find the Train Manager.

Another compliment to the train Manager was the way he looked after his Newquay passengers, who would change at Par for a local service. By this time, the train was running 20 minutes late, due to speed restrictions imposed because of extremely high winds. Newquay passengers were getting worried about missing their connection. But the announcement went something like this:

"Here is an announcement for passengers travelling to Newquay. Please do not worry about missing your connection at Par. The driver of the Newquay train is travelling to Par with us on this service. I can therefore assure you there is no way the Newquay train can leave before we arrive. Please sit back and relax. There will be time for all passengers to disembark this service and join the Newquay train before it departs."

So now I knew who the staff I had found during my great sandwich hunt had been - the driver and crew for the Newquay service - no doubt travelling down from Plymouth. Announcements such as this, a little beyond the routine, display a thoughtfulness for passenger welfare and concern during times of disruption that would be welcome more widely across the rail industry.

The catering trolley finally reached our seat at 17:00, 9 minutes before scheduled, and 20 minutes or so before actual arrival into Penzance.

Wednesday 14th November (Penzance - Newcastle - Bedlington)

We would dearly loved to have taken the train direct from Penzance to Morpeth. However, even with Senior Railcards, it worked out cheaper and quicker to go by train as far as Exeter only, then fly from Exeter to Newcastle.

We booked the lunchtime train to Exeter, again this was with GWR, and again one of their new Hitachi trains. The journey was uneventful except that the seat reservation system wasn't working, rather surprising for a train that was only 2 months old. We really felt the train surge forward as it left the 15-mph speed restriction after the Long Rock level crossing a few miles out of Penzance.

The catering trolley attendant looked rather crestfallen at the stock of sandwiches we, and other passengers, had already bought before boarding the train at Penzance in memory of our inbound experience, but GWR must realise if they let you down once, they will damage the reputation of their ongoing business for a long time ahead.

We arrived at Exeter on time, and the transfer to the airport was really very simple, the bus 56 running half-hourly and leaving from the station forecourt, the fare of £2.60 per person being very reasonable.

It's rare for me to miss a ticketing trick but on this occasion, I think we did. Exeter Airport is included within the Exeter Plusbus limit, and although the Plusbus add on price of £2.80 is marginally dearer than the single fare to the airport, our Railcard discount would also have been applied to the Plusbus fare which would have made this option a few pence cheaper.

Exeter airport was a breeze, at the time we whisked through there were more staff than passengers. However, the Flybe flight to Newcastle was delayed by 90 minutes meaning train the whole way to Morpeth might have been quicker after all, but nevertheless still dearer, which I find unacceptable.

At Newcastle airport, it is impossible to buy a through ticket for the Metro to Regents Centre then bus to my home town of Bedlington - something for our new North of Tyne authority, which formally came into being whilst we were away, to consider. However, both the Nexus Metro and Arriva bus now accept credit cards meaning that incoming foreign passengers don't have to worry about having small change on them.

At Airport Metro station, the CIS showed the next train departing from platform 1 in 22 minutes. I had previously consulted Traveline North East and according to my notes a train was due to leave in just 8 minutes. A train was in fact waiting at platform 2, where the CIS was blank. So, we joined that and sure enough it left when expected, the CIS not having corrected itself. Incorrect CIS at an unstaffed airport station is not a helpful way to treat those visiting and unfamiliar with the region, and we expect Nexus to do better.

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