



“Worse Trains for Chepstow”

Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) and Arriva CrossCountry (AXC) Timetable Changes. December 14th 2009.

Arriva Trains Wales have announced that they will be making cuts to train services affecting Chepstow, Caldicot and Lydney with effect from Monday 14th December 2009.

Two trains will be withdrawn each day from Monday to Saturday: they are the ones that now call at Chepstow at 20.52, running towards Cheltenham from Cardiff, and the corresponding return trip to Cardiff that now calls at Chepstow at 22.29.

*As a result of these changes there will in future be a service gap in the Cheltenham direction of **1 hour 37minutes** after the 18.49 train and the next one at 20.26. After 20.26 the next train is at 21.49, **1 Hour 23 minutes** later!*

The train from Cheltenham towards Cardiff which at present calls at Chepstow at 22.29 will be withdrawn and in its place an AXC train will stop at 21.52.

The BT4C Reaction

BT4C and STAG attended a meeting with Commercial Director Mike Bagshaw and the Head of Franchise & Stakeholder Management Michael Vaughan at Arriva Trains Wales on the 22nd October following the publication of the cuts in their Timetable. The services were not shown as withdrawn in the Arriva Trains Wales Timetable “Consultation” Document, and only appeared afterwards. We hoped to persuade Arriva to defer making these changes until all three train operating companies (FGW, ATW and AXC) could meet and agree to provide a more regular and better co-ordinated service along the Chepstow line.

Arriva Trains Wales insisted that the cuts to the service were necessary economies forced upon them by the recession and were within the terms of their franchise contract. They did not claim that the actual numbers of passengers travelling on the Chepstow line were any lower now than they had been for many years since the franchise started, but that they just needed to make savings.

The Chepstow line already suffers a haphazard and irregular service that takes little account of passenger needs and this change, proposed by Arriva Trains Wales, will simply make it worse.

Passengers at Chepstow, like the rest of Wales, need a regular clock-face timetable and services that connect into Wales as well to Bristol, London, and Birmingham.

It must be remembered that the Arriva Trains Wales franchise contract dating from December 2003 is controlled by the Welsh Assembly Government at Cardiff Bay and the Arriva CrossCountry franchise contract was awarded by the Department for Transport at Westminster and commenced in 2007. Arriva have therefore had a monopoly of train services through Chepstow for more than 2 years and BT4C had hoped that the ATW and AXC would co-operate to improve our services.

The change that makes a bad situation worse may seem unimportant but some of us who have been working for several years attempting to get our train services improved feel that we have been “stitched up” by this co-ordinated action from Arriva CrossCountry and Arriva Trains Wales. We fear that if this change goes unchallenged these two companies may contrive further cuts next year.



Under the terms of their contract AXC are required to serve Chepstow with at least two trains a day in each direction. The DfT contract doesn't stipulate which trains must stop and this is left to the discretion of AXC. Three of these four mandated stops fit well in the timetable and complement the ATW service. But STAG and BT4C have for the past year or more, suggested to AXC that the public would be better served if they met their contract obligation on the fourth train by stopping a morning service between 08.00 and 10.00, where there is a 2 hour gap in the ATW service, rather than continuing to stop an evening train between two ATW trains spaced one hour apart. AXC declined to entertain our sensible suggestion.

The evening AXC train that we argued served little purpose and was unnecessary was the 21.36 AXC (Chepstow) the train that Arriva XC now plan to run at 20.26 as a substitute for the axed 20.52 ATW! The change now proposed will therefore prevent any possibility of AXC filling the morning peak gap at Chepstow within the terms of their franchise.

The absence of up direction services at Chepstow between about 8am and 10am is a serious issue especially for young people wanting to use the train to get to work at Chepstow, Lydney, Gloucester or Cheltenham.

Axing the 20.52 ATW is also a blow to STAG and FGW who have for the last few years been working to restore stops at STJ and to reconnect Chepstow with Bristol. The axed ATW train connected at STJ with the 20.04 FGW train from Bristol TM to bring passengers back to Chepstow from Bristol and Portsmouth. It was only restored by FGW in May this year specifically to meet the expressed needs of Chepstow residents.

The Franchise System is the Problem.

All these problems stem from the Franchise system described as a muddle by The Commons Transport Select Committee in its 2006 report:- (House of Commons Transport Committee, Passenger Rail Franchising. 14th report of session 2005/6. HC1534 Published 5th Nov 2006.).

The contracts provide no incentive for a Train Operating Company to increase the number of passengers carried or to take any responsibility for serving the community. The community bears the cost for services denied to it.

The TOC is protected from a fall in revenue and penalised if it increases above a certain level under a "Cap and Collar" deal embedded in the franchise contract. It is unsurprising that their entrepreneurial skills are directed towards cutting costs to the bare minimum and doing nothing outside specified contract obligations.

The division of revenue from ticket sales is manipulated under an Association of Train Operating Companies agreed funding system known as ORCATS. Every company running a service along a key route is entitled to a share of the total amount spent on tickets. We don't know exactly how this works but the hand out is based on the number of seats offered not upon the number of passengers carried. In theory, an operator could run a train which no one boarded and still stand to gain from their share of the overall non-operator specific tickets sold on that route.

The TOC's performance is judged according to a PPM target based upon the time of arrival at a train's final destination. Meeting this target is assured by adding 5 minutes or so to schedules at the end of a route. In Monmouthshire this is also helped by not specifying stops at Severn Tunnel Junction and Chepstow.

The franchise system was intended "to improve passenger services and harness private sector commercial judgment and innovation to reduce net cost and increase value for money". But in this area fragmentation has led to a lack of co-ordination between services of the different train operators and it is perfectly obvious that the train services in this part of Monmouthshire fail to meet local aspirations.



Monmouthshire is served by three different franchises and so far as Chepstow is concerned none of the contracts have improved our services and two made them worse. None of the franchise contracts contain any specific requirement for the services to be integrated and connect with other services. In fact we discovered that the former Transport Minister when directly questioned would, or could not answer who bore responsibility for this elementary need. From our experience here in Monmouthshire the failure of the Government to be quite prescriptive in its contractual requirements has caused the greatest difficulty and loss of services.

1. The ATW franchise took away the hourly service to Cardiff.
2. The FGW franchise removed the requirement for the trains to stop at Severn Tunnel Junction and effectively cut Chepstow off from Bristol.
3. The AXC franchise could have delivered an hourly service to Cardiff and Birmingham but failed to mandate that all trains stopped at Chepstow. In specifying that only four trains should stop it failed to make sure that they were all useful.
4. In the past 4 years 110 train service connections have been lost and 33 restored for travellers from this area. (The connections are the result of co-operation from FGW)

Since AXC took over the Cardiff to Nottingham franchise nearly 18,000 trains have passed through Chepstow without stopping. At first it was claimed that there wasn't time to stop but the Transport Minister now accepts that time is not a constraint. They could and should stop and each train through Chepstow has 150 or more empty seats. The equivalent of 50 empty taxis passing through the town each way each hour!

What Next.

This concerted action by Arriva Trains Wales and Arriva CrossCountry to worsen our train services through manipulating two franchise contracts, one with the DfT at Westminster and the other with the Welsh Assembly, must be unique.

If this collusion had brought improvements to our impoverished services we would not complain but since the monopoly is beginning to make services worse for the community we think it is time for those in charge of the contracts at Westminster and Cardiff to be particularly vigilant.

We predict that if this move is allowed to go ahead then the next move will be for AXC to cut out stops on one of its useful morning services.

ATW have operated this service for 6 years and we propose that the change should be postponed until a better solution can be found. There is a great deal of scope for improving services if only the 3 TOC's could be brought together to co-ordinate their services.

Jim Jenkins,

Chair, Better Trains for Chepstow Team