

# TO BE, OR NOT TO BE?

## 1. TO SHUTTLE OR NOT TO SHUTTLE

At one time, London Transport used to be fairly consistent in its service provision for passengers. One aspect of this was with shuttle services, provided only when traffic was light or, in the case of the Aldwych branch, couldn't operate any other way because of the one-way physical layout at Holborn, with its connection only to the eastbound Piccadilly Line.

Shuttle services have come and gone, but more recently have gone and come! – take Mill Hill East, for example. Opened on 18 May 1941, the Mill Hill East branch became a shuttle service after 19.00 on weekdays and all day Sundays, no doubt for the reason of traffic potential, or lack of it. However, from October 1943 the Saturday evening shuttle service was replaced by through trains while the Monday to Friday evening shuttles continued until replaced by through trains right through to the late evening from November 1945.

Although through trains on the Mill Hill branch were the norm for much of the day on Mondays to Fridays, from April 1955 a shuttle service was provided for an hour after the morning peak and for an hour before the evening peak on Mondays to Fridays to facilitate uncoupling and coupling on the 'main' line. This must have been unpopular because it lasted only until the end of January 1956.

The Sunday service to Mill Hill East, however, remained a shuttle service until October 1967 when through trains began to operate following a major reorganisation of the City branch service resulting from the northbound City branch diversion at Euston in connection with Victoria Line work. Before this change, one seven-car train was uncoupled in Highgate depot early on a Sunday morning, to provide 1x3 and 1x4-car trains for a 12-minute shuttle service. Because two trains were involved, these had to terminate in the southbound platform at Finchley Central and reverse via the south siding. Return to Mill Hill East could be either via platform 1 or middle platform 2, although the former route from the siding was removed after signalling rationalisation following the goods yard closure in October 1962.

However, after some 40 years of through trains on a daily basis, the Mill Hill 'shuttle' re-emerged from October 2006 on Mondays to Fridays during the off-peak service, with Saturdays and Sundays following suit from June 2007. Now, of course, one train suffices running (mostly) every 15 minutes or every 13-13½ minutes according to which service pattern is operating on the 'main line'. The latter service, however, can only be worked with two Train Operators (one at each end) because of insufficient turn-round time for one. There are still through trains to and from Mill Hill East, of course, in the rush hours.

## CHESHAM

A shuttle service that was thought that would go on *ad infinitum* is the Chesham shuttle, provided by various types of stocks over the years, but since 1961 by four-car units of A60/62 Stock. The comparatively derisory off-peak traffic offering made it a candidate to remain unchanged as a shuttle, save for the two through workings in each rush hour, during which time the shuttle train sits idle in the bay platform at Chalfont & Latimer.

Now, in an amazing about turn (see below) proposals are afoot for a through service to and from Chesham on a daily basis (see *Underground News* No.560, August 2008, page 570). Maybe someone realised that when the S Stock arrives, there will

be no four-car versions of it and presumably LU doesn't want to run a heritage shuttle service of A Stock like South West Trains do with slam door stock on their Lymington branch.

If a half-hourly through Chesham service was introduced, this would generally mean that Amersham would be served by four trains per hour instead of the present six. One can already hear "Amersham man" stamping his hobnail boots in protest at such a (33%) reduction, but it should be understood that with even four off-peak trains per hour from Amersham, nobody will be left behind on the platform, nor will anyone have to stand on trains leaving Amersham – there will be plenty of room for all. And that is despite the large off-peak traffic increases in the last 25 years. Back then, just two trains per hour was the norm from Amersham – one four-car A Stock and one four-car LMR DMU. In all this, it is even more amazing that just two or three years ago, the then Metropolitan Line management wanted to do away with all Chesham through trains (see *Underground News* No.560, August 2008, page 570). The consultation process revealed that "Chesham man" can get equally riled when needs be!

So now we wait and see if we will say goodbye to the Chesham shuttle. Certainly a through service would be more appealing, might attract more traffic and would be less of an operational headache. For example, when the shuttle unit has to go out of service because of a defect, the nearest replacement train is at Neasden, which means a 2-3 hour period without trains, according to train crew and stock availability. In the meantime, Chesham passengers are ferried to and from Amersham by taxis, which are generally available at short notice from a local company – other operators' taxis and replacement buses take much longer to organise and implement.

Notwithstanding all of this, every effort is made to run the Chesham shuttle service, even at times of staff shortage. When your writer worked at Neasden in the early-1970s during the time of a severe shortage of guards and with one-third of the service regularly cancelled, to cancel the Chesham shuttle was not the desired option. As it was put to me at the time, "cancelling the Chesham shuttle is like cancelling the Flying Scotsman", and you therefore didn't!

## **2. TO STEP BACK OR NOT TO STEP BACK?**

The principles of train crew 'stepping back' are applied when there are terminal stations with a restrictive layout, but a frequent service is necessary. With a Train Operator ready and waiting to take an in-coming train out again almost immediately, frequent services can therefore be achieved with a two platform terminus. The arriving Train Operator will then take the next train away from that same platform, giving them sufficient time to change ends. This is effectively double stepping back (of two trains). At least, that is the theory and when things are running smoothly, it works well.

In more recent times, however, stepping back has been introduced even when there has been sufficient time for Train Operators to change ends, but only just. This has included Aldgate and (from 6 October 2008) Arnos Grove, the latter being for reversing trains only, and just during peak hours. This will enable more trains to reverse at Arnos Grove, freeing up a little more space at Cockfosters.

Stepping back now takes place at the following locations:

Aldgate	Introduced rush hours from September 1997.
Brixton	Rush hours from opening, latterly most of each day.
Arnos Grove	From 6 October 2008 – Train Operators of reversing trains

- step back one train.
- Elephant & Castle      A long-term stalwart. Rush hours from October 1937 (except the war years) but latterly Monday to Friday midday and Saturday 'busy'.
- Waterloo & City Line    At Waterloo Mondays to Saturdays and Bank Monday to Friday rush hours.

For a time, the Jubilee Line crews stepped back at Charing Cross (from its opening on 1 May 1979 until December 1982 and from January 1989 to April 1991), the Hammersmith & City crews at Barking (June 1958 to October 1960 – during reconstruction of the station) and the East London Line (at Shoreditch from May 1990 to May 1993 and at Whitechapel from June 2006 until the line closed in December 2007). On the Jubilee Line Extension, stage I had crews stepping back at North Greenwich and when stage II opened, at Waterloo.

The fact that the Northern Line tried stepping back at Morden from July 2002 to January 2008 was to enable a 2-minute service to operate between Kennington and Morden. OK, there are three platforms at Morden, I hear you say – 4½ minutes to turn round and 1½ minutes for track clearance. However, there are also trains entering and leaving service at the build-up and end of each peak and thus only two platforms are available for the reversing service and stepping back. Therefore, quick turn-round times were required and the only option for a 30tph service was stepping back – 2½ minutes for trains to reverse and 1½ minutes for track clearance.

Stepping back at Morden was thus scheduled in two platforms – 3/4 and 5, the island platforms 4/5 containing the crews and managing them if the service got disrupted. Trains to and from Morden depot therefore generally used platform 2. The theory of all this was fine – until there was disruption, and the Northern Line wasn't known for its perfect service, if only for its operating complexities. During disruption and when sufficient crews were available, trains would be reformed to the timetabled order of departure wherever possible. Care had to be taken to ensure that a crew was available for the train it was being reformed to. All too often there were instances of severe out-of-turn working and the Train Operator for the next departure northbound is actually sitting outside at the southbound home signal waiting for a vacant platform! Perhaps for this reason, stepping back on the Northern Line was abandoned from January 2008. With adjustments to running times and revised service patterns, 28tph between Morden and Kennington could realistically be achieved without stepping back at Morden – at least the crew that brought the train in would take it away (with the exception of meal break reliefs, of course).

Other lines which don't normally 'step back' have done it when special services have operated for engineering work – the Jubilee at North Greenwich and Canary Wharf, the Piccadilly Line at Wood Green, the Central Line at Marble Arch and Holborn and the Bakerloo at Paddington. In each case, the same principle applies, although whether one or two trains are stepped back depends on the circumstances.

At the end of the day, stepping back is designed to provide quick turn-rounds at terminal stations and this it does with reasonable success. However, it needs train staff to be in the cab and ready to depart when the signal clears, instead of walking down the platform towards the cab when the signal is already clear.

One of the strangest examples of stepping back was perhaps on the East London Line at Shoreditch and Whitechapel in latter days, when Train Operators stepped back one train in the single platform. Because trains were only four cars long, all too

often there was time for the departing Train Operator to have a quick chat with the arriving Train Operator, making it all rather pointless.

We have now seen two totally separate railway operating practices which can differ from management to management – such is the diversity allowed. And while that continues, we will never be sure what will happen next. We can certainly never say anymore, “that will never happen on my line”. Who would have thought that one Line General Manager would want to be rid of Chesham through trains and the successor would want them all day, every day!