

your letters



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YOUR LETTERS

High-speed vanity project's false dawn



Picture: ADY KERRY

SIDETRACKED: HS1 Javelin train

It was launched with a fanfare of trumpets and it promised the dawn of a new age of rail travel in the South East.

Its roots go all the way back to the Channel Tunnel Bill and the promise that even those of us who live in east Kent, behind the "Tunnel door", would enjoy the benefits of the rail link on domestic services. What a let down!

A year on, the much-vaunted High Speed 1 may contribute to the domestic bliss of commuters from Ashford to St Pancras who take what the railway company likes to call the "Happy Train" to and from work having enjoyed an extra 20 minutes in bed in the morning, but it does little for anyone else.

In spite of risible claims that "a majority of commuters now use the high-speed service" the reality is that anyone travelling from east Kent and the Medway towns is now paying a great deal more to be taken to a station they do not want to arrive at for the privilege of then making a 20-minute underground journey back to the place they really wanted to get to.

Door-to-door journey times (the times ministers, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the train operating company do not understand are what matters) are longer and the fares higher.

What Southeastern trains euphemistically describes as the "classic" services that still run, occasionally, into Victoria, Blackfriars and Cannon Street now travel at snail's pace, stop at stations most of us never realised had escaped the Beeching axe and are overcrowded.

Meanwhile, the high-speed trains have been shortened in recognition of the lack of public support for what, with hindsight, has become an unfinished vanity monument to the last government and many of the coaches that the benighted taxpayers of Kent are being compelled to fork out for lie idle and moth-balled in goods yards in Faversham and elsewhere. No doubt to be spirited away to another grand project in due course.

I really would like to applaud High Speed 1 but suspect I shall be pushing up daisies before any real benefits accrue to those whose interests I try to represent.

There are, for instance, as Network Rail told me very recently, no plans in the pipeline to extend the Javelin service from Ashford through to a Thanet parkway station or even Ramsgate.

your blogger

Malcolm Triggs is old enough to know better, but believes Facebook is a very good thing



FUNNY thing, Facebook.

As a father I see the wasted teenage time, lament the awful grammar and poor spellings it inspires and despair of many of those jokey 'Like' groups that are only occasionally funny – although I confess to chuckling at "The awkward moment in McDonald's when an emo orders a Happy Meal".

We've all heard the one about the man sitting on his own in the pub with a laptop that 'pings' as a new message arrives. "Yay, I've got 23 friends," he shouts, only to be asked why, in that case, is he sitting on his own.

Too many people post too much drivel (or worse), too many schoolchildren are on Facebook when they should be doing homework, and all of us should have more self-control when it comes to the F word.

But – and here I feel like the new boy at an AA meeting – I love it. "My name is Malcolm, I am 52 and I love Facebook." A weight has just lifted from my shoulders. Now I can start to rebuild my life.

Facebook allows me to see what friends and family have been doing, share pictures, get involved in lengthy debates and have a chuckle at status updates.

All good stuff – but not that important. So try this. Last year I set up a Facebook page dedicated to the aircrew who defended this country in 1940. It is called "Remembering the Few – The 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, 2010" and it now has 11,853 'Fans'.

The page is part of a campaign to raise awareness of the Battle of Britain Memorial Trust, working hard to

raise funds to build an education centre at Capel.

The other week, one of the Fans asked me, as page admin, to reveal who I was because "My dad wants to thank you for setting up this page". When I made contact she told me her father was Charles (Tich) Palliser DFC AE, who flew with 43 and 249 Squadrons in the Battle of Britain.

Now 91 and living in Australia, Tich Palliser, wartime hero, asked his daughter Gill to sign him up to Facebook so he could feel part of the anniversary commemorations for what he and his mates had done.

He was "absolutely thrilled" to find so many people who still cared about the veterans.

This week, Gill posted another message pointing out that she had now (thanks to Facebook) managed to trace the son of Tich's best friend from 249 Squadron. "This is so wonderful for my dad," she told the world.

So, yes, Facebook has its faults, but even if making Tich Palliser feel valued and helping him find the family of one of his long-lost friends is the only good thing it ever does, it will have been worth all the "LOL JKS" in Christendom. But there is, of course, one more thing it can do. It can inspire you, gentle reader, to visit www.battleofbritainmemorial.org and contribute to the appeal that will help future generations continue to remember Tich and his colleagues.

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No plans to sort out the missing miles of new track, alter bridges, remove level crossings and deliver the 60-minute service from Ramsgate to London that was actually achievable a quarter of a century ago using old trains, old stock and existing signals and track.

So much of our hard-earned bundle has been ploughed into HS1 that there is nothing left over to swiftly upgrade the signals and the points that might, then, at least deliver a swifter service on the Kent coast line. And now, in order to, as Southeastern's media apologist so elegantly puts it, "pay for investment", we are facing, following three years of above average fare increases, a further rise not of the ministerial RPI plus three per cent, but of 12.8 per cent on tracks that carry passengers to and from one of the areas of highest social deprivation in the country.

And while those travelling faster and at less cost to other more affluent areas of the South East, Kent's rail passengers can only wonder at the stupidity of a system that denies access to a port, a potentially viable regional airport and, of course, to businesses that might wish to invest in east Kent if only they could travel there by rail at speeds in excess of 35mph.

A year on, then, my view is that HS1 has been brought about at inordinate cost and waste, to the benefit of a very few and to the detriment of the many who are paying for it but who wish to use other services. Dick Turpin would

have been amazed, I think, at the gall of those who, at least for the moment, are being allowed to run our railway. No point in holding up the passengers at pistol-point, Dick. Their pockets have already been emptied by other highwaymen.

Roger Gale MP (Con), Thanet North

Our commuters are paying a premium

I cannot see why Ashford commuters should pay any more for their season tickets than other commuters in the county.

According to your report last week, we will be paying nearly five per cent more than other areas. Surely the percentage rise in fares should be the same across the board. It might be the case that Ashford has benefited most from the new high-speed trains but we have to pay a premium fare to enjoy the convenience.

What about rail users who still use the old mainline services to Victoria and Charing Cross? They have seen no benefit from the new trains.

Although they pay less, the rise of 12.7 per cent is still the same.

Southeastern seems to have chosen Ashford because it is a popular route and it can make the most money on it. If we want to attract new business and people to the town rail fares need to be as low as possible.

Name and address supplied

Monetary benefits are far from clear

At last it seems we are benefiting in some way from the Olympics (Yourashford, December 1).

It was good to read a nursery in Wye is supplying plants for the Olympic Park. However, the true financial benefits still seem very unclear. Councillors may hope we can attract a visiting team to train at the Julie Rose stadium, but as yet no one has confirmed they will be using it. There may be an increase in tourism but it that realistic.

Surely any first time visitors to the UK will want to see the sights and sounds of London rather than come to Ashford. They may perhaps find the time to visit Canterbury and the cathedral. What do we have that can compare with those?

Name and address supplied

Message obscured by Ed's glottal stop

I find myself unable to listen to a word Ed Miliband says – not because of the content but because of his totally false way of speaking.

He attempts to adopt the current trend of deliberately dropping the 't' off of the end of words and I find myself more intent upon seeking these out than I do listening to what he is saying. It is a deliberate way of speaking as occasionally, he forgets to do it. If it were a genuine

speech inflection or impediment it would be more consistent or only used as a point of emphasis. Unless he eliminates this false way of speaking, I for one will never hear his message.



WRIGHT ON: Last week's blogger

Bob Keen

Cutting EMA lifeline will damage UK plc

In the entire furore about increases in university tuition fees, the abolition of education maintenance allowance (EMA) has got far less coverage, and yet it matters just as much and there are a lot of recipients in Medway.

There are 3,500 students aged 16 to 18 in Medway who get the grant now, but unless the Government changes its mind they will be the last. The money goes to encourage students from less well-off families to stay on in school and college rather than leave with low-level skills and take whatever job they can get. And it works: MidKent College in Gillingham reckons 60 per cent of their students get and need the EMA. It is the same in many of our secondary schools where EMA is a serious motivator to students in the last two years of school. Heavens knows how British industry will ever reclaim world status if we can't get youngsters into college to study as bricklayers hairdressers and mechanics. Maybe this Government thinks they should all hitch hike to college or get jobs as bankers.

Derek Munton, by email

Companies working the transfer system

I was pleased the Government has announced plans to reduce by 2015 immigration from non-EU countries to tens of thousands, rather than the hundreds of thousands it was under the previous government.

However, I was disappointed that intra-company transfers were excluded from the immigration cap that Home Secretary Theresa May announced, which is why I asked my question. The abuse of the intra-company transfer system by some IT companies is a scandal that has been going on for some time and was brought to my notice by a constituent who was himself made redundant when he was replaced by a foreign worker. My constituent has been unable to find another IT job since.

I was waiting to raise the matter and the Home Secretary's statement was my opportunity. I will continue to press the Government to crack down on companies which abuse the system and ensure British businesses do employ qualified British workers when they are available.

Gordon Henderson MP (Con), Sittingbourne and Sheppey