**Train or plane?**

[bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk/manchester/content/articles/2008/10/01/011008_train_vs_plane_feature.shtml) |



Commuters: returning to rail travel

When it comes to commuting to the capital, a growing number of passengers from Manchester are letting the train take the strain – instead of the plane.

Improved journey times, environmental concerns or the ability to use your laptop - there are lots of reasons why the train is proving a popular choice for London-bound commuters.



London commuter numbers up by 62%

Certainly since 2005, commuter rail journeys between Manchester Piccadilly and Euston station have risen by 62% – from 1.29 million in 2005 to 2.09 million between March ‘07 and April ’08.

Whereas, according to Manchester Airport, the number of passengers choosing to fly the same route is down by 160,000 – or 9% - over the same period.

And in response to the rising popularity of rail travel, Virgin Trains is now set to increase its hourly service to the capital from two trains per hour to three by December.

**Debate**

The train vs plane debate hit the headlines during the 2008 Conservative Party conference.

The Tories said they would build a new high speed rail link between London St Pancras, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds, saying it would remove the need for a third Heathrow runway by cutting flights by 66,000 a year.



Virgin: more commuter trains planned

"The Tory proposals are interesting, but on the existing line we’ve seen incredibly strong increases in passenger numbers over the past three years between Manchester and London. This is partly due to the fact that our route improvement works have got better,” said Virgin Trains Communications Manager, Ken Gibbs.

“Passengers tell us that some years ago they switched to air, but since the improved service by rail they’ve switched back and indeed we’re seeing new customers switching over to rail.

“The new December timetable enabling more trains and the planned additional Pendolino coaches from 2012 will give us even greater capacity which we’re confident there’s a demand for,” he added.

From December, the existing three Piccadilly services which reach London before 9am will be increased to five, and the journey time on the current 7.05am service will be cut from 2 hours 6 minutes to 1 hour 58 minutes.

**Commuters**

It’s been a long wait for faster and more reliable rail journeys to London. But the £8bn upgrade to the West Coast Mainline has done enough to persuade many commuters.



Flight to Heathrow or train to Euston?

Stephen Oathen, aged 36, a consultant engineer travels between Stockport and London four times a month:

He said: "There’s been some disruption with the improvement work, but the service is quick and reliable. It means I don’t have to stay overnight and I can get back home to see my children. An even faster service will obviously be great, but I’ve no complaints at the moment."

Paul Millington, aged 35, a financial adviser from Northenden said: "I’ve noticed the difference. There are far more people on the London train now. Lots of jobs require people to travel to meetings in London and the service is pretty good."

**Flights**

However, business flights remain an option for many. In 2007/08, 1.7 million people flew from Manchester on one of three airlines operating domestic flights to London.



Check-in: air passenger numbers are down

Belgian airline VLM flies in and out of London City Airport while BMI and British Airways both run regular departures to Heathrow.

A Manchester Airport spokesperson accepted that passenger numbers to the capital were down.  But he said that air travel still had its advantages over rail:

"High speed rail may, one day, be an alternative for Manchester to London passengers but you cannot apply this to all domestic air travel. For example, a critical domestic business route such as Inverness is nine hours from Manchester by train and only 45 minutes by air.

In addition, around 50% of passengers travelling to Heathrow connect to other flights and whilst we are seeing more direct services from Manchester Airport, rail is not currently a viable alternative for air connections."