

# JUST THE TICKET

**After late running trains and the high cost of fares, it's getting stuck in long queues to buy a ticket that annoys passengers the most. But now advancements in technology are helping to change all that. Buying a ticket has never been easier, as**

**Peter Plisner has been finding out**

There's nothing worse than getting to the station when you're running late only to find that half the ticket desks are shut and those that are open have long queues at them. Then after a long wait you're almost at the front and Sod's law says that the person ahead of you is always the one that takes the longest to deal with. If this is an all too often occurrence, then perhaps its time to start persuading passengers to move with the times and try out some of the new ways of buying a ticket.

To start with, for many years there's been the option of purchasing via the internet. The Trainline.com was the first to offer the chance of avoiding the queues. It allowed rail users to buy tickets before they travel and get tickets either sent through the post or pick them up at the station using special ticket machines.

Providing easy ways to buy rail tickets has always been a top priority for the privatised rail companies. Difficulties in paying fares is often seen as a barrier to actually using public transport. One company, Chiltern Railways, was one of the first to invest to speed things up at the station. It's Queue-Buster machine was developed in 1997. It was specifically designed for the company and was so revolutionary that recently one of them has become part of railway history after being put on display in the National Railway Museum! The Queue-Buster has been superseded by more modern, sophisticated machines that have the ability to take card and cash and produce day and advance tickets, something the original Queue-Busters could never do.

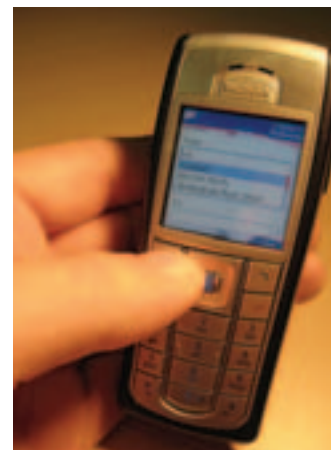
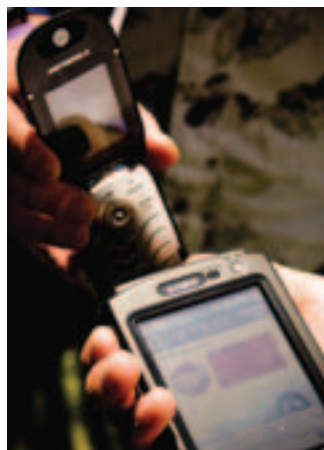


It was innovations like the Queue-Buster that won Chiltern so many plaudits within the rail industry and even today the company is still leading the way when it comes to ticketing solutions. David Whitley, Chiltern's marketing planning manager says: 'We've always been a customer-focused company and not just in ticketing. We knew that the advancements in ticketing were going to happen and we wanted to be at the forefront so that our passengers were the first to experience it.' Research had already indicated that customers wanted easier and simpler ticketing and that the industry seemed to be looking at Chiltern's management to pave the way. Innovation was made much easier for Chiltern because, when it started, it wasn't part of a big transport group, unlike most of the other Tocs.

After being the first to offer 'print-at-home' ticketing, last year Chiltern passengers were given the ability to buy tickets over the internet and have an 'e-ticket' sent to their mobile phone in the form of a text message containing a barcode. Staff onboard trains and at stations have special barcode readers allowing them to check the validity of a 'mobile ticket'. Some barriers at stations have also been converted to include bar-code readers.

The new ticketing concept has been provided in partnership with YourRail, a Yorkshire-based business that supplies technological solutions and ancillary services to train operating companies. Its role has been to specify all of the systems and architectures that have been used in the mobile technology on behalf of Chiltern Railways. YourRail director David Gillick says: 'Customers deserve to have a better way of travelling and purchasing tickets and Chiltern was willing to pioneer this type of service. I think you'll see more and more of this in the weeks and months to come.'

The barcode technology was supplied by Mobiqua, a world-leader in mobile ticketing technology. Its latest applications include sending airline passengers electronic boarding cards. Passengers just offer their phones for scanning before getting a plane. According to founder and technical director, Ronnie Forbes, people really like the idea. 'Passengers were offered a choice of tickets to print at home or to be sent to a mobile and 90 per cent choose mobile. Consumers just love it.' And the good news is that according to Chiltern, since it launched mobile ticketing, more



Chiltern's e-ticketing initiative allows customers to buy tickets online, with each sale generating a barcode which is sent to the customer's mobile phone. Conductors, and some ticket barriers, have barcode readers to check the validity of the code. A new trial is being run which allows passengers buy tickets direct from their mobile.



Chiltern has been finding novel ways to promote its e-ticketing option.

than 60,000 people have used the service. Apart from making it easier for passengers to travel, mobile ticketing has the potential to drastically reduce the operational costs of printing and distributing paper tickets. It could also be used to help phase out cash collection on trains, something that can often be quite time consuming for on-train staff.

Not content with claiming a UK first for internet-to-mobile ticketing, Chiltern and its technology partners have recently gone one step further with the introduction of the world's first mobile-to-mobile ticketing. The latest system allows passengers to book their tickets using their mobile phones, rather than having to sit in front of their computer before they travel. A trial, which started last month, involves 50 passengers. It's been developed with the help of secure mobile applications firm, Masabi.

Co-founder and head of security development, Ben Whitaker, says using the new system couldn't be easier. 'You get sent a text message that starts the install off on your phone automatically and then the application becomes available as one of the icons on your phone.' The mobile-to-mobile scheme is seen as a natural progression to the previous Chiltern e-ticket scheme. Whitaker says: 'This is the final step – just before you're able to stroll towards a train and whip out your phone and order your usual ticket. You'll then be able to step on the train.' The panacea, according to Whitaker, is being able to book tickets from anywhere to anywhere on your phone and it's something that's not far away. The main issue is getting people to use a mobile phone application. Many people just haven't done that before.

However, with concerns about security still an issue even for internet users, sending personal data like credit card details over a mobile phone will no doubt present further worries amongst consumers. Masabi claims to have developed the world's first 'certified' security system on a mobile phone. Whitaker says: 'A lot of phones don't have any security in them and typing in credit card details could be a risky business. We got British Telecom's labs here in the UK and the US Government's cryptography team to certify this security system for mobile. It's a British company achieving a world first.'

The system primarily uses a GPRS or 3G connection, now a standard feature of most mobile phones. However, in areas where coverage is patchy or weak, then the software can also communicate via standard SMS channels. The cost of transmitting the data to the passenger is minimal. Downloading the initial software costs around 10 pence, while buying a ticket via GPRS or 3G is less than half a penny.

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## The mobile phone ticketing revolution appears to have many benefits. It can help to increase advance sales and allow tickets to be sold up to the last minute

the last minute. Companies that use it can also reduce distribution and operational costs and could have the ability to track passenger volumes automatically and in real time. Passengers get instant delivery, avoiding the need to post tickets, something that caught many passengers out during the recent postal dispute. With up to 95 per cent of the population now carrying a mobile phone, the potential is enormous.

Already Chiltern has plans to expand it. The company says that once the passenger experience is right, it will increase ticket availability further over the next six to nine months. David Whitley says: 'Our long-term vision is that there will be a reducing need for paper tickets. Smart media, whether it be phone, smartcard or even print-at-home tickets, will be the much more common way of issuing tickets and the paper ticket side will probably go down to 25 per cent.'

But does it mean the end of the conventional ticket office? YourRail's David Gillick thinks not. He says: 'It's much like a bank. At one point people said telephone and internet banking would cause local branches to shut down and although it did happen, banks are now re-introducing more and more direct customer service, but now it's more targeted and related to real need.' And that appears to sum up is exactly what Chiltern is now doing on the railways.

*Peter Plisner is the BBC's Midlands transport correspondent.*

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