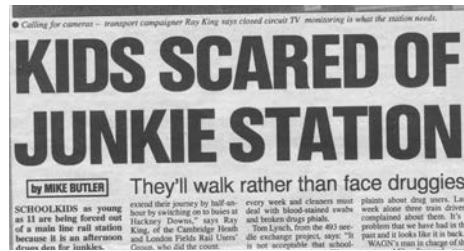


# Two small stations come back from a near-death experience

Case Study: CAMBRIDGE HEATH AND LONDON FIELDS



East London Advertiser  
January 1998

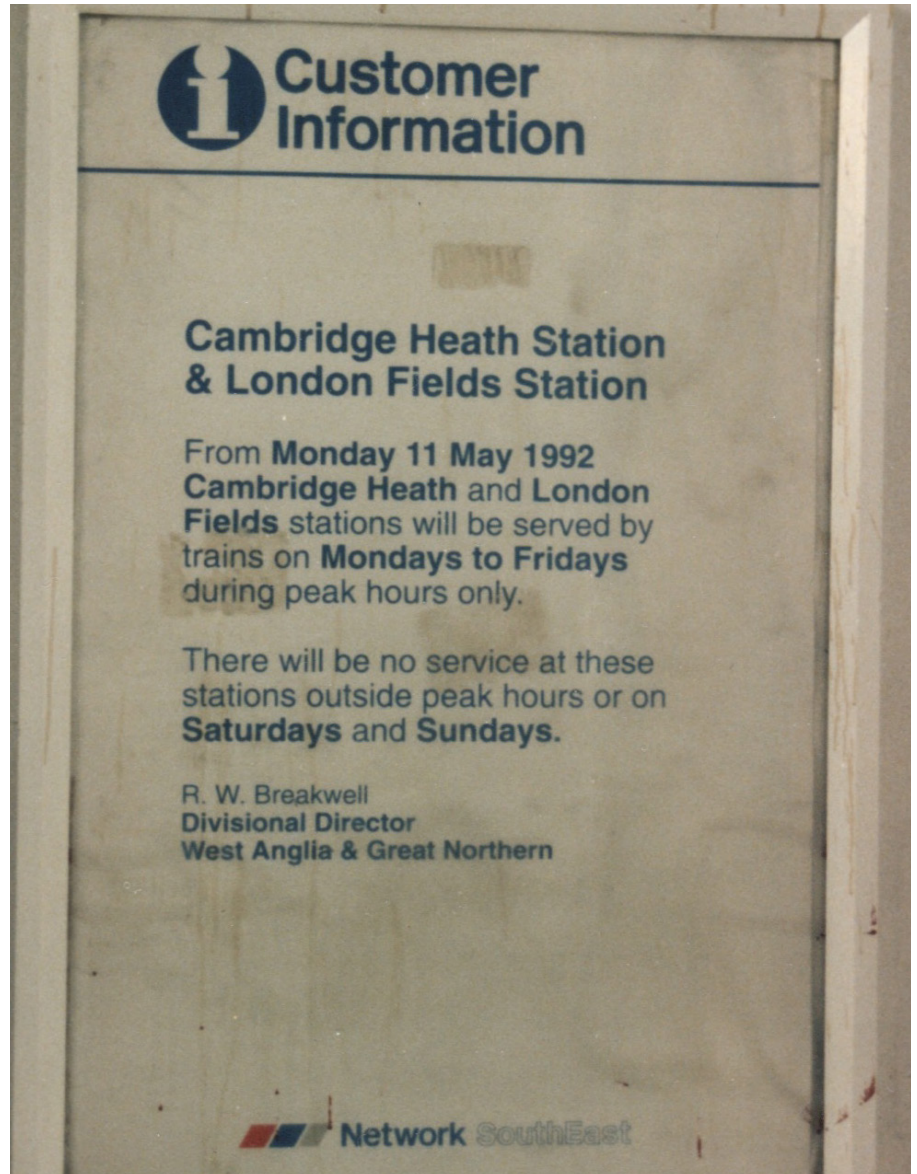


Hackney Gazette  
January 1999

The prospects for two London stations which were written off as “a disgrace” years ago have been transformed.

From being neglected and on the verge of closure, Cambridge Heath and London Fields stations in East London are now welcoming around two million passengers each year, contrary to what the official figures say.

In the 1990s, the stations just about survived a deliberate slim-down imposed by politicians and implemented by British Rail managers. It was either the Government's response to the economic slump of the early 1990s or a deliberate exercise to make it easier for private companies to run the trains. The 1993 Railways Act (privatisation) was passed by Prime Minister John Major's government a year after the timetable cuts took effect. Shocking neglect by post-privatisation companies



*BAD NEWS AT CAMBRIDGE HEATH: British Rail's Bob Breakwell announced the axing of the all-day service in 1992. Was BR following Government's orders to slim down prior to privatisation? Below, the crumbling edge of quality: The entrance hall at Cambridge Heath in 1992*



followed. One company even sacked the station cleaners to save money and improve the company's finances.

In 1999, Belgian TV came to Cambridge Heath to film "one of the worst stations in Britain" after they were thrown out of Liverpool Street station for having the cheek to film passengers.

In 1992, the timetable was slashed so that just a handful of trains ran in the morning and evening rush hours. This insulting excuse for a service was made even worse by cancellations at the whim of the Liverpool Street control office, which had orders to give priority to other passengers.

There were no trains during the day, in the evening or at weekends, and even the trains that were supposed to stop were allowed to skip the stations so the companies could massage their punctuality statistics.

Campaigners suspected that there was a hidden agenda to provide such a poor service that one or both of the stations could be closed.

After a 25-year campaign by local passengers to show that the stations were wanted and needed, and with help from local newspapers in publicising what the group was doing, reluctant rail managers gradually improved the timetable after being confronted by statistics (collected by volunteers counting passengers) which showed that in spite of the inadequate service, more and more people were using the stations.

The campaigners were supported by Jerry Gold and Graham Larkbey from the official watchdog, the London Transport Users



*SHAME: A Belgian TV crew interviewed Ray King in 1999 and filmed Cambridge Heath, "one of the worst stations in Britain"*



*CHRONIC NEGLECT: Vandalism went unchecked for years*

Committee. Eventually the rail managers became more enthusiastic and now there is a train every 15 minutes in each direction on every day of the week.

The stations are also now shown on London's popular Rail and Tube map as part of the London Overground network and their future looks secure.

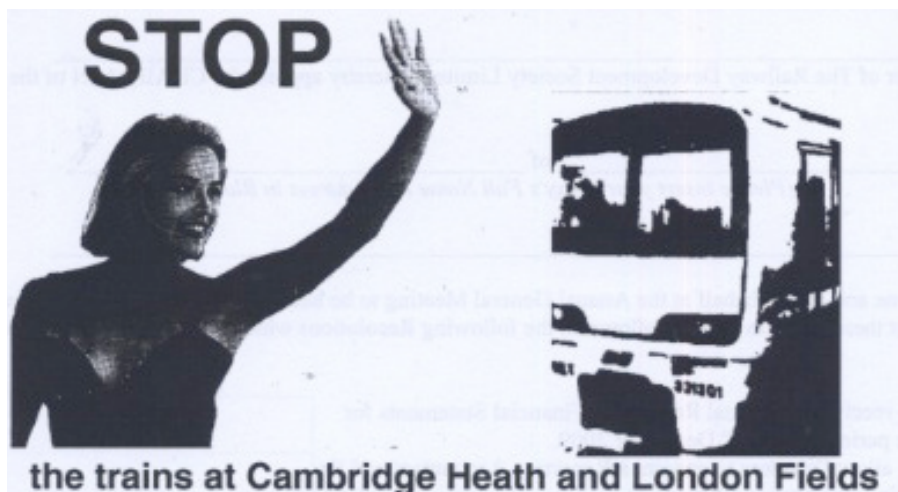
The key to success was to show that the official statistics for use of the stations were wrong – “hopelessly and grossly misleadingly wrong”. Campaigners Ray King and Roger Blake, both now retired, began counting passengers at the stations in 1996 and continued until 2016.

They were able to confront managers with real figures.

At first they had to print their own timetables and stick them up at the stations because the train companies failed to do so. They even had to make their own poster boards.

Cambridge Heath and London Fields Rail Users Group now has 20 years of real statistics to compare with the misleading official figures, collated by the Office of Rail and Road, which still seems unable to get to grips with the digital revolution that has transformed rail ticketing and travel. Oyster pay-as-you-go was introduced to the stations in 2008 (as far as Seven Sisters), then extended in 2010 to cover the line's stations within the Travelcard area, and again in 2013 further out to Cheshunt and Broxbourne.

In 1993 only 38 trains a day were timetabled to stop at each station and in 1996 this rose to 44. However, in 1998



### Secret service

“Cambridge Heath is the most secret station there has ever been. We walked straight past it, and were directed back by an obliging local. It is privacy gone berserk. It is well-nigh hidden from public observation, a station run by John le Carre's “Moscow Rules”. There are no signs outside; no staff; no notices or timetables; no information of any kind. It is a highly confidential station. George Smiley must be the station master.”  
-from The Clandestine Railway, a report by the London Regional Passengers' Committee 1985

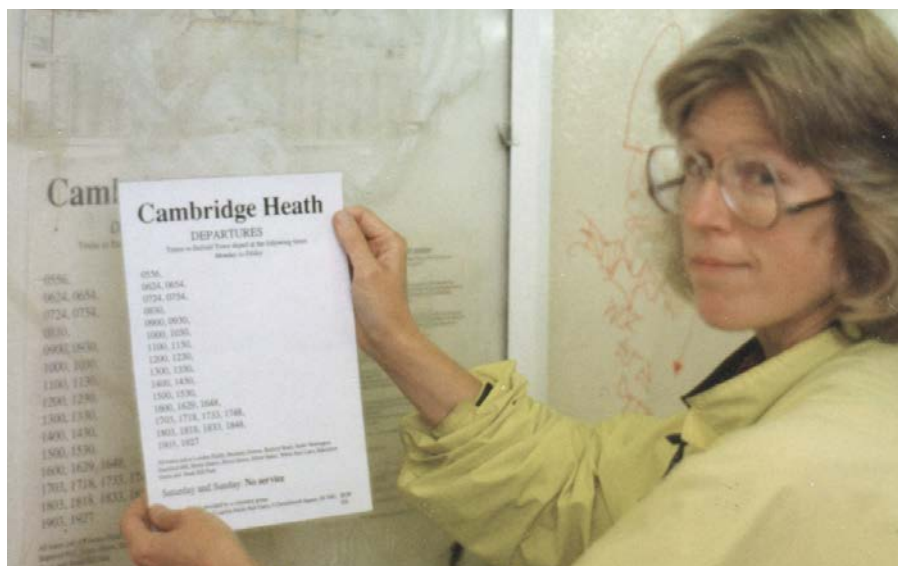
### People like trains

Shortly after this damning report was published about Cambridge Heath, the train service and the publicity improved. Passengers started to return to the station and were impressed by the service. Revenue was increasing faster at this station than any other station on the line from Liverpool Street to Enfield.

### Return to the Twilight Zone

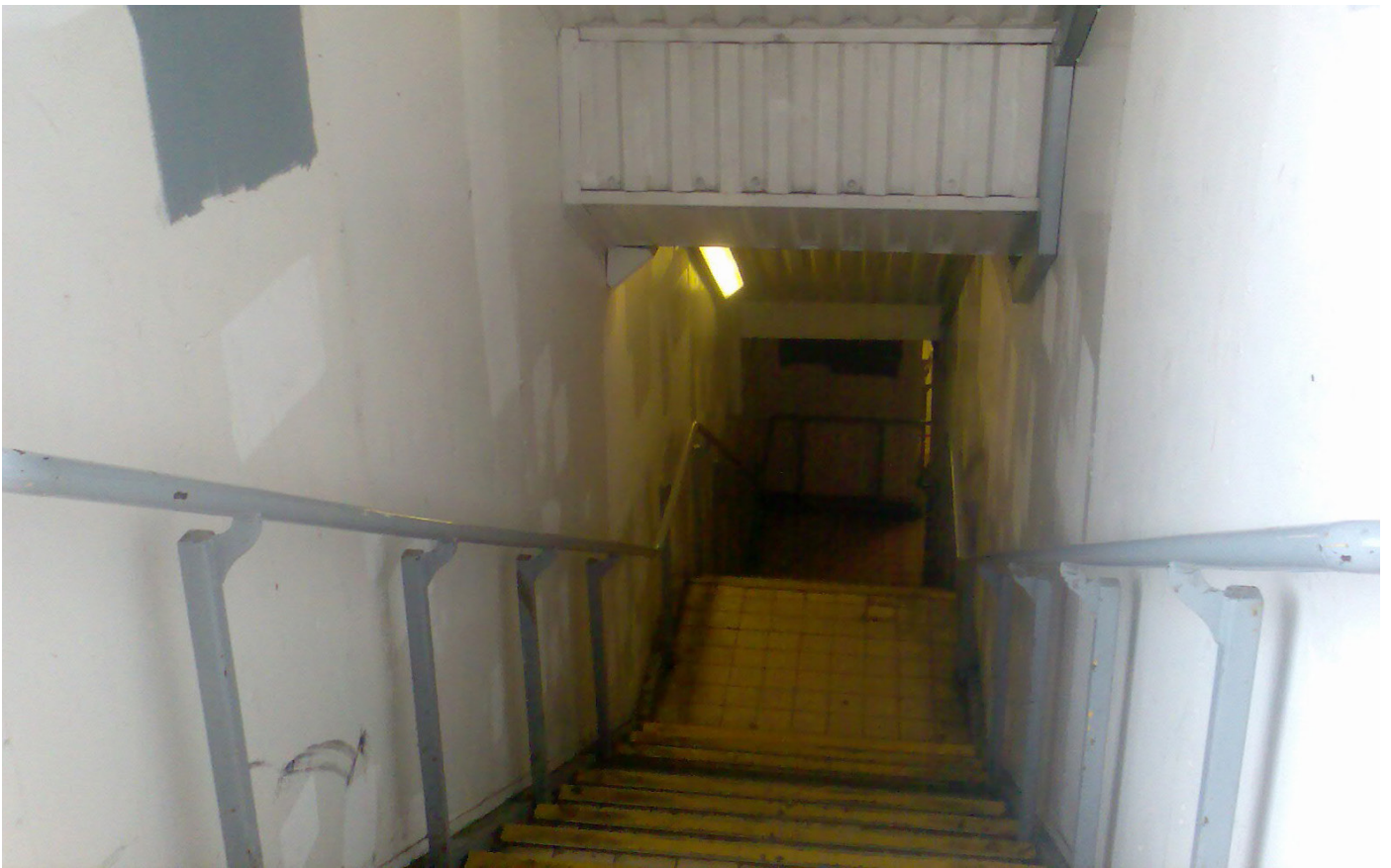
After this period of growth and revitalisation, someone ordered that Cambridge Heath and London Fields

*STOP THE TRAINS: The group's first poster calling for trains which ran through the station but did not stop, to be restored*



*INFORMATION: Volunteers from the user group had to produce timetables to paste up at the stations because the train operators failed to provide them. In 1999, Maggie King displayed a home-made timetable. In answer to repeated requests, a train information system, see right, was eventually fitted on the platforms at both stations in 2004*





*CAMBRIDGE HEATH STAIRS TO PLATFORM 1 IN 2007: This was often a place for drug addicts to hide away from prying eyes and was used as a toilet, much to the disgust of passengers*



*CAMBRIDGE HEATH: The litter-strewn entrance hall in 2007 with the boarded-up and abandoned ticket office on the right. The smell of urine was often so strong people had to hold their noses*

this increased to 64, meaning that there were trains throughout the day, which marked the beginning of the turn-round in the stations' fortunes.

In 1999 though, many of the people walking past London Fields and Cambridge Heath stations did not realise there was an all-day train service.

"There's no point in going in there," said one friendly but ill-informed passer-by near Cambridge Heath. "No trains stop there."

In fact nearly 1,000 passengers were counted in a day at the Cinderella stations and the user group said in its newsletter: "Now Cinderella can go to the ball."

In 2001 WAGN (the West Anglia and Great Northern company, which was owned by Prism Rail) introduced evening trains until midnight, as well as a Saturday service, although there were still no trains on Sundays.

It meant there were up to 82 trains per week day, more than double just five years previously. The evidence of the passenger counts proved to rail managers the real level of demand.

A celebration party was held at the Pub on the Park near London Fields station, where guests included councillors and officials from Hackney, Tower Hamlets and the Greater London Authority as well as managers from WAGN.

The arrival of no-nonsense Jim Holden as station manager also saw other improvements including the arrival of new passenger seating.

In 2004 a train information system, closed circuit TV and help points were promised.



*TEN YEARS AGO: In 2006, a special train ran to London Fields from Liverpool Street on 7 February to show off the improvements at our two stations, including CCTV and train information systems, largely funded by Transport for London and Hackney Council. It seemed like an end to years of neglect although the improved service of extra trains, introduced in December, was subject to temporary cuts*



*DOWN OUR WAY: London Assembly Member Jennette Arnold, Transport for London rail chief Ian Brown, Hackney Councillor Guy Nicholson and ONE Railway managing director Dominic Booth who came to London Fields in February 2006*

In December 2005, there were further improvements, with four trains an hour in each direction on weekdays, four trains an hour on Saturday, and Sunday trains for the first time for years, albeit only two trains an hour.

As a result, passenger numbers doubled in one year.

The number of weekday trains increased to 160 a day, but fell back to 141 (because of a shortage of drivers) before going back up to 160 a day in 2008.

Despite the improved train service, conditions at the stations were described as “absolutely disgraceful” by most passengers. “Cambridge Heath is disgustingly dirty most days,” said one regular passenger in 2007. The train operators were largely to blame but drug users were also misusing the station with no one to stop them because the station had no staff. A needle disposal box was even installed inside the station.

Meetings were held with the British Transport Police and the local drug action team.

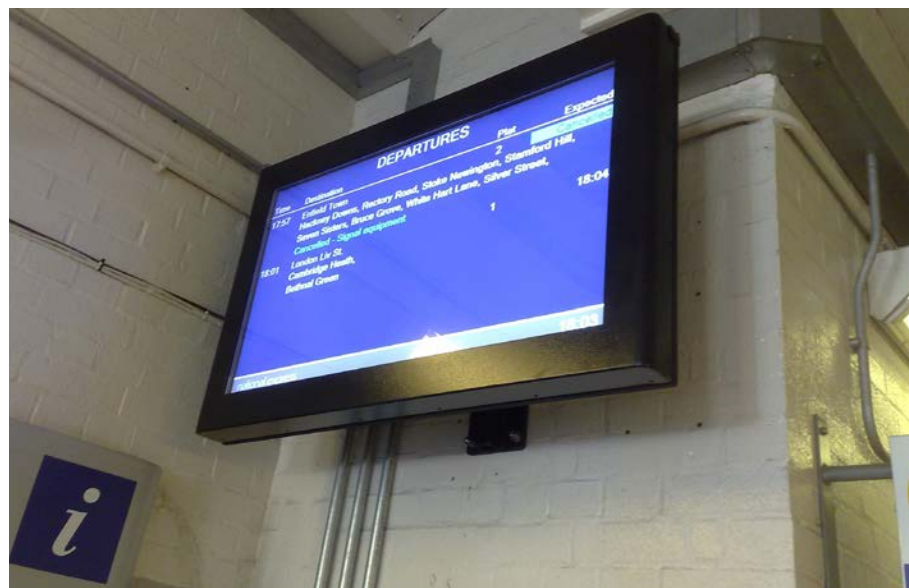
There were also regular problems with unreliable and out-of-order ticket machines, made worse by over-zealous ticket inspectors who often refused to believe that the machines were not working.

The reopening of the London Fields open-air Lido in 2008 boosted passenger numbers and by 2010 the figures showed that there were actually four times the number of passengers using our two stations than the official figures suggested.

It is possible that Oyster card and Travelcard use was being ignored by the ORR.



**LONDON FIELDS:** The entrance in 2003 with its WAGN branding and, above, the ticket machine which was often out of order



**INFORMATION:** The screen at ground level at London Fields station, installed in 2011 and funded by Hackney Council



**CAMPAIGNERS:** Maggie King, Ray King and Roger Blake who spent hours at the two stations counting passengers

In 2011, cuts to the number of morning peak trains affected more than 200 passengers a day at Cambridge Heath, prompting the user group to protest.

Because the train operator got more fare revenue from Hertford East (at that time outside the Travelcard and Oyster boundary), it gave priority to those passengers, at the expense of Cambridge Heath passengers, who saw their six trains per hour morning peak service cut to four.

In 2013, free wifi was introduced at the two stations which enabled passengers to check live departures on their smart phones when the platform indicators were not working.

In May 2015 London Overground took over both the train services and the stations. The Sunday service was doubled to match the rest of the week and the shoddy, down-at-heel station standards passengers had endured for years were improved step by step.

With the presence of friendly and helpful Overground staff equipped with mobile phones to keep people abreast of train cancellations and delays, passengers, particularly women who had been reluctant to use the stations alone or allow their children to use them in the dark, became more confident.

Because of the presence of staff, there has been a marked reduction in anti-social behaviour at the stations.

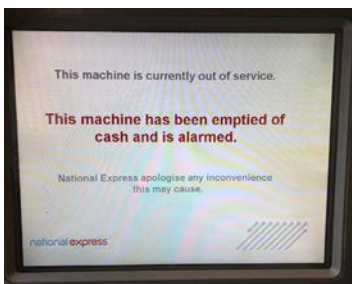
Passengers have also been impressed by the remarkable improvement in cleanliness.

The two stations were run by British Rail until 1997 when privatisation led to the

## ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT



**OUT OF ORDER:** Ticket machine on 7 November 2011



**OUT OF ORDER AGAIN:** Ticket machine on 21 November 2011



**AFTER THE PAINT JOB!** The roof of the entrance hall at Cambridge Heath station, above

**AFTER THE PAINT JOB!** At the top of the stairs on the down platform of Cambridge Heath station, left

CAMBRIDGE HEATH AND LONDON FIELDS NEWSLETTER

December 2011

*The user group newsletter in 2011 had to point out that there were still many faults after builders gave the stations a facelift*



**COMFORT IN THE COLD:** The trains provided a service through the snow storms of 2009

appearance of WAGN. From 2004 to 2007, the service was run by ONE Railway, which changed its name in 2007 to National Express.

National Express continued to run the service until 2012 when Abellio took over.

## What next?

There is a new confidence that the future of the two stations is secure but there are still things that need doing.

The users group is hoping that Sunday trains will run from 07.00 rather than 09.00, and that there is capacity on the line to improve the current train service frequency from every 15 minutes to every 10 minutes. CHLFUG would also like to see some of those extra trains going along the Chingford line to Walthamstow, even though it might require a timetable shake-up. Currently passengers have to change at Hackney Downs to get to Walthamstow.

London Fields station CCTV is linked to Hackney Council's live-monitoring centre and for the future CHLFUG wants to see Cambridge Heath's cameras monitored live by Tower Hamlets Council and London Overground.

The platforms are reached via long flights of stairs so the provision of lifts at the stations would make life easier for parents with pushchairs, travellers with heavy suitcases and disabled people.

Ramps on the stairs would help cyclists and the group would also like to see live train information screens at ground level at Cambridge Heath to match the screens



1992: Slam door trains and graffiti at Cambridge Heath station



2012: Sliding door class 315 trains are more than 30 years old



2012: Cambridge Heath station receives some welcome care and attention. Things have improved even further since then



at London Fields which were installed in 2011 thanks to funding from Hackney Council. The user group has been unable to persuade Tower Hamlets Council to provide similar funds for Cambridge Heath.

A second entrance in Hackney Road would also be a boon for Cambridge Heath station, as the new second entrance at London Fields has proved to be.

Passengers have been impressed by LOROL (a joint Arriva MTR company) which has run the service since Transport for London took over from Abellio in May 2015.

But in November 2016, Deutsche Bahn's UK transport division Arriva assumes sole responsibility for running not only the Cambridge Heath and London Fields trains but all of London Overground.

The contract is said to be worth £1.5 billion and will run for up to nine and a half years. Overground services are operated under a concession awarded by TfL rather than a franchise awarded by the Department for Transport.

The new inspection and checking regime should ensure that standards will be maintained or even improved. CHLFUG will be watching.

In 2018, new British-made Bombardier Aventra trains will replace the existing class 315 and 317 trains which are now 35 years old.

CHLFUG would also like the two stations to be designated "Art stations" so the large artistic community in the area can display their wares and become more involved.



*2015: Some of the 22 passengers at London Fields station on 2 December boarding the 17.29 train to Cheshunt*



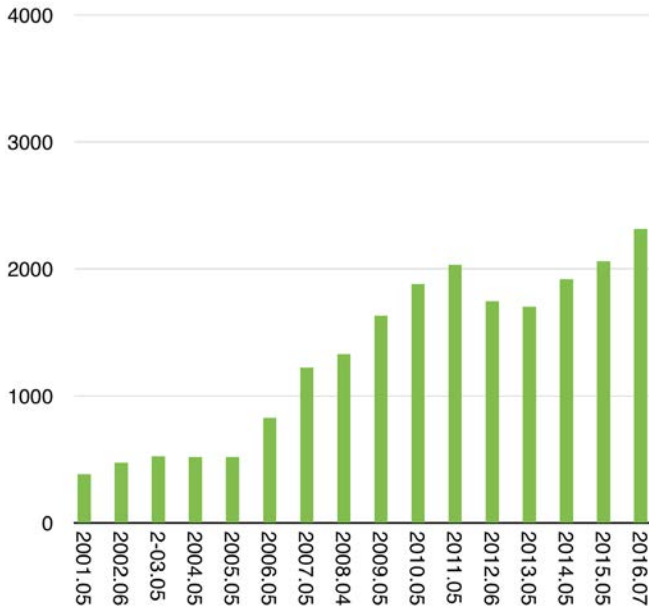
*2016: Some of the 67 passengers at London Fields on 12 July who boarded the 08.24 to London Liverpool Street station*



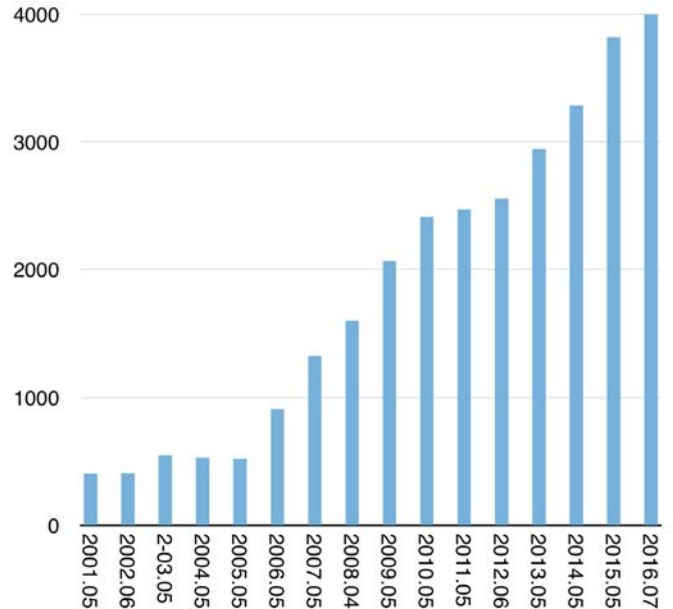
*Roger Blake analysing the figures after a day spent counting passengers at London Fields station in December 2015*

# Growing passenger numbers 2001 to 2015

Cambridge Heath



London Fields



Passengers were counted between the hours of 0545 and 1930 in May each year, although trains continued to run until midnight.

London Fields has grown faster than Cambridge Heath, partly because the peak hour timetable is better.

The CHLFUG counts show that the Office of Rail and Road figures are vastly underestimating the number of passengers.

In 2012-13, our figures, based on counting actual passengers, indicated that there were 576,900 people using Cambridge Heath station.

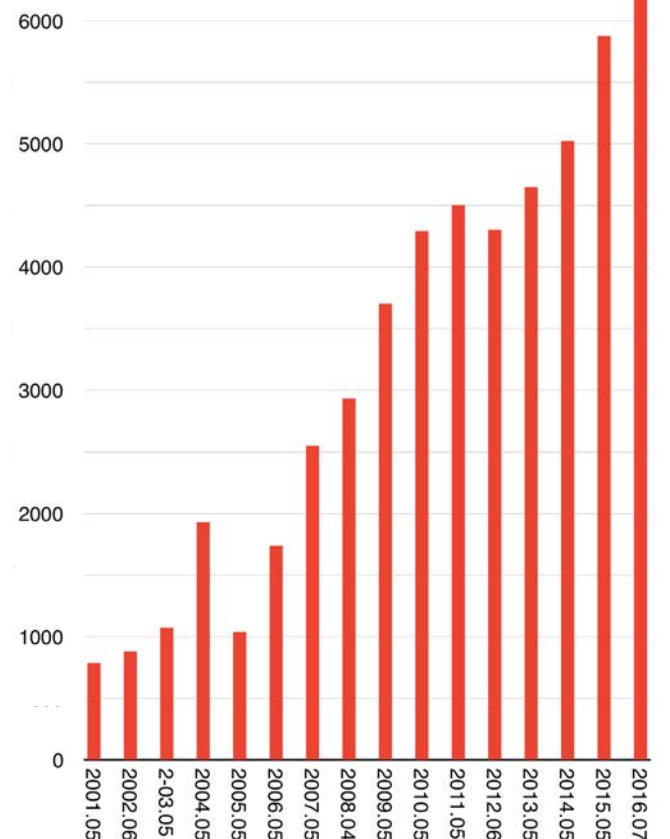
The ORR figure – which politicians and planners rely on – is only 296,692.

Our figure for London Fields was 986,851 while the ORR estimate was 496,262.

Many passengers now use Oyster cards, travelcards (and more recently contactless pay-as-you-go) which the ORR seems unable to include in its estimates.

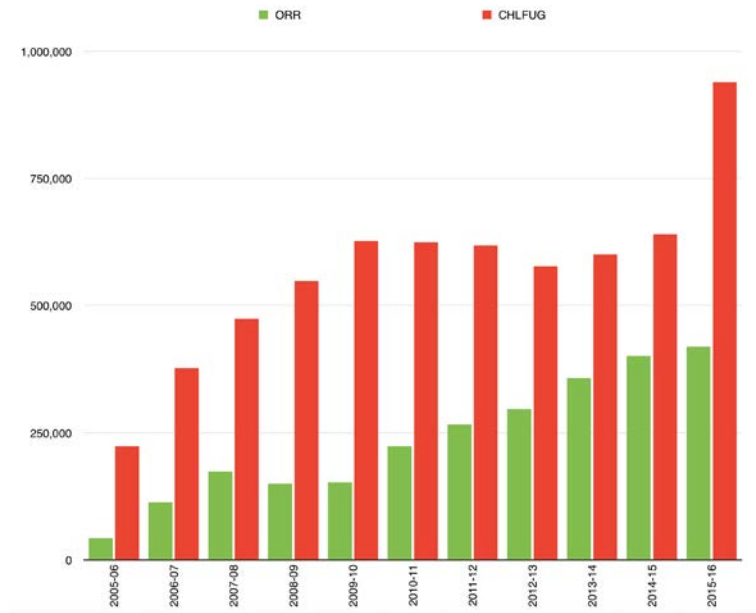
The ORR figures claim that use of Cambridge Heath declined by 13% in 2007-9 when it actually rose by 15%. The ORR figures claim that use of London Fields declined by 11% in 2007-9 when it actually increased by 28%.

Combined Cambridge Heath and London Fields

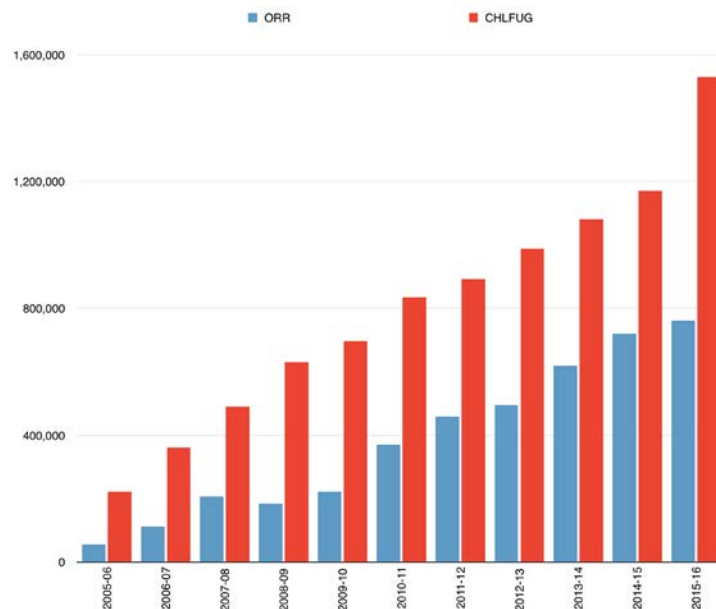


# The user group's figures compared to the 'official' ORR statistics

Cambridge Heath



London Fields



These two charts show how official statistics are vastly underestimating the number of people using Cambridge Heath and London Fields stations. The red columns are the CHLFUG daily count figures extrapolated to a year (courtesy of Jonathan Roberts Consulting) to provide a comparison with the Office for Road and Rail statistics (2016 ORR figures are estimates. ORR figures are published in December)