

The Rages Rag

Newsletter of Rail Action Group, East of Scotland

www.kylemore.btinternet.co.uk/rages.htm

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First Impressions

First Group took over the ScotRail franchise on October 17th 2004 and immediately imposed their corporate identity on the operation – trains, ticket machines and station publicity had the First logo introduced. Most staff received new uniforms and First-designed timetable leaflets replaced the National Express



First ScotRail's new livery with Moir Lockhead and Mary Dickson. Photo: SNS Group Bill Murray

produced ones. Information leaflets, carrier bags and a credit card sized list of telephone numbers were distributed and "Meet The Manager"

sessions have been held at key stations.

Added to introductory travel offers through newspapers and e-mailed direct to registered season ticket holders and an impressive website (www.firstscotrail.com), it is difficult to imagine how, in creating brand awareness, anyone could have done better.

But of course what really matters is performance. Given that First inherited the same train units and staff of the previous franchisee, it would be unreasonable to expect any change in operational standards in the short term. Indeed the North Berwick service has continued to move along with virtually all trains running, but most evening peak trains are still a few minutes late. Circumstances such as over-running weekend engineering work, when coaches had to be used for the morning peak of October 18th, and delays to allow late running GNER trains to head south do not help First ScotRail in their strive for punctuality.

RAGES will of course continue to monitor how the service performs.

RAGES Annual General Meeting

At our fifth Annual General Meeting held on 9 September 2004 in the East Linton Community Hall, the Chairman welcomed 23 members and thanked Allison Cosgrove for arranging the venue. Apologies were received from 21 members. The minutes of the 4th Annual General Meeting held in 2003 were approved with the addition that it had been held on 3 September 2003.

Résumé of the past year

Tom Thorburn reported on a successful fourth year for the group. A high profile had been obtained by sending 65 letters to key politicians and opinion formers supporting an Edinburgh to Dunbar local service, with subsequent extension to Berwick, and new stations at East Linton and Reston. Although not included in the existing franchise arrangements an undertaking had been obtained that should funding be assured then the successful franchisee would operate such a service.

RAGES had been heavily involved in the stock replacement arrangements for the North Berwick line and had worked closely with GNER concerning parking at Dunbar. It had also successfully campaigned for morning peak hour trains to run into Platform 11, rather than the more obscure Platform 20, thus making connections much easier. The group had also been active in ensuring that plans to remove the 18:35 hrs ex-Edinburgh journey serving Dunbar under a new East Coast

franchise were reviewed. *[Ed - see article on page 4]*

RAGES had liaised closely with East Lothian and Scottish Borders Councils in work on the Scoping Study for East Linton and Reston Stations, with estimated minimum daily demands of 190 and 200 passengers per day respectively.

Chairman's Report

Tom Thorburn said that the group had gained a lot of respect over the past 12 months and he thanked the Committee members for their hard work. Particular appreciation was

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Welcome to this issue of The Rages Rag, which we publish regularly. It is the main means of communication with our members.

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The editor invites contributions which should be sent to him at the "Published by" address at the foot of page 4.

Annual General Meeting

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forwarded to retiring Treasurer Ian Bowman and to John Denning who had resigned from the Committee as a result of taking up a new post in Angus.

Secretary's Report

Roy Mitchell advised that the year had started with ScotRail enhancing the Sunday North Berwick service to provide an all year round timetable with evening services introduced, and that correspondence with both ScotRail and GNER had continued to develop services and improve reliability. Issues raised included the slow speed of the new ticket machines, the impact of electronic barriers at Waverley and the temporary assignment of former Inter City stock to the North Berwick line.

Treasurer's Report

Ian Bowman presented the accounts revealing that a deficit of £292.32 had been recorded in the financial year but that there were still £570.03 funds in hand at the year end of 31 March 2004. Income of £596.69 was similar to the previous year (£622.55) but expenditure had increased from £769.69 to £889.01, mainly due to greater meeting expenses.

Membership Report

Current membership was 199, which was 42 more than last year with 88% subscription renewal rate. Lapsed members were contacted in Dunbar by post, in East Linton by Allison Cosgrove and Reston by Barrie Forrest with the result that 20 members had rejoined.

There were now four Community Councils as members: Haddington and District; Reston and Auchencrow; West Barns and Coldingham. *[Ed - Dunpender has now joined]*

Four newsletters had been produced – plus a 2-page colour edition for North Berwick service catchment area members in relation to the replacement trains introduced in May. Electronic Rags continued on an ad hoc basis to members with e-mail addresses

Election of Office Bearers

The vacant post of Treasurer was filled by Harald Vox, who was proposed by Ian Bowman and seconded by Russell Darling.

Other committee members were re-elected en bloc, proposed by John Denning and seconded by John Clare.

The vacancy for the Dunbar representative still exists as there were no volunteers at meeting.

Other Matters

John Clare advised that the Rail Passenger Council (RPC) has great respect for RAGES, but that the Government seemed determined to want to replace the RPC. He asked that RAGES show support for the retention of an independent body dealing with complaints. Tom Thorburn said that RAGES worked closely with the RPC and would discuss the proposal at their next Committee meeting.

Guest Speaker

Our invited speaker was Gordon Dewar who is the Commercial Director of First ScotRail. He outlined the

company's plans for the franchise, which they were to take over on October 17th 2004.

He laid out his commitments the company had made: fare collection priority; improved bus-rail links and ticketing; an improved training regime would be in place, with new uniforms in situ. A "meet the manager" session would be provided every four weeks at a key station and there would be a 6 monthly customer forum. A number of off peak offers would be provided.

Some of First's key bid commitments as indicated in his handout were:

- Improve performance from the current 85.5% to 92% by 2011 through fleet replacement, reliability improvements, contract management and enhanced resources
- Deliver rail link services on specific routes on a trial basis
- Run a £50k annual inter-modal advertising campaign
- Reduce ticketless travel from over 7% to 4% through gating initiatives, additional staff and self-ticket machines
- Deliver a premium commuter service for the Edinburgh-Glasgow-Aberdeen triangle
- £30m investment package for a number of reliability modifications and refurbishments to rolling stock



Gordon Dewar. Photo: RAGES

Gordon outlined what he called Quick Wins:

- Reactive maintenance team on board ready to start on day 1
- Station/train heavy cleans
- Launch value-added products for off-peak
- SMS text service up and running in week 1 for commuters
- Face to face customer engagement
- New uniforms on day 1
- Customer contact centre

As First were not the operators of the franchise yet it was difficult for Gordon to respond to any specific points which related to current operation.

John Clare commented about the reliability of station announcements.

Harold Vox raised the problem of reaching the ScotRail office on Platform 14 at Waverley to make any enquires.

M Ferris raised the difficulty of the Perryman's bus from Coldingham not connecting with the morning train from Dunbar to Edinburgh but this a matter for the bus operator and East Lothian Council.

J Hayman wondered if First would run a bus from Haddington to meet trains at Longniddry – Gordon Dewar stressed his commitment to improved bus-rail links but advised

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North Berwick Service News

Although the majority of trains have operated largely within a few minutes of their scheduled departure time there have been occasional difficulties with the loco-hauled units that have led to journeys lost or ScotRail diesels having to be pressed into service.

One such problem arose after the first day of the Sunday closures taking place between September 19th and October 24th when points problems at Drem junction lead to cancellations and late running during the morning peak, whilst a breakdown on the 18:37 hrs ex-Edinburgh on October 11th resulted in a delay of over 20 minutes. The 18:17 hrs from North Berwick was commandeered immediately on arrival at Waverley to return eastbound. On Saturday August 21st the 21:25 hrs ex-Edinburgh was delayed by 15 minutes until a cleaner could be found to remove litter! Why this was particularly necessary since such practice cannot be carried out on peak hour trains from Haymarket at peak is questionable especially as there were 200 or so passengers waiting. In addition, with a two-car multiple unit being used, around 50 passengers had to stand.

Indeed RAGES had raised concerns at the use of two-car units on busy weekend services following overcrowding on "Festival Sunday" and therefore it was pleasing that on Fireworks night (Sunday September 5th) the ex-Virgin trains were in use with their extra capacity. RAGES has also mentioned to ScotRail that the movement of the 17:34 evening service to Platforms 1 or 11 results in no revenue checks prior to boarding. Even the most conscientious conductor is pushed to work through the train by Longniddry. Difficulties in seeking advice from the ScotRail office on Platform 14, which is beyond the barrier area, have also been raised.

Hopefully these will be dealt with under the new franchise as operated by First Group.

X7 Service to end

First are to withdraw the X7 Haddington to Newcraighall rail link service after operation on November 12th.

Although a cynic may suggest that the service started to give 'bonus' points to the First bid to run ScotRail services, the realistic fact is that loadings have been abysmal and First could far better use the coach and drivers elsewhere in their network, with Haddington passengers to Edinburgh able to use the X6/X8 express bus services instead.

Let them eat cake!

A further welcome to First ScotRail offers was that of coffee and cake at various outlets in major stations and your correspondent duly took advantage of this at Millie's Cookies on Waverley Station.

Unfortunately the voucher could not be accepted as Millie's had run out of cake. Never mind, I thought, I'll have a donut instead.

"No sir! I am afraid you have to eat cake. I can't let you have anything else no biscuits, cookies, crisps, donuts - it must be cake and I haven't got any!!

So I was sent away to Tasse!, where I got coffee and a muffin. They didn't have cake either, but obviously a muffin must be near enough. Delicious - thanks First ScotRail!

Sunday Trains

A further issue we will be taking up with First will be the arrangements when the North Berwick line is closed for scheduled maintenance and buses used to provide replacements. National Rail enquiries denied all knowledge that replacement buses were running until 20:20 hrs (!) on September 19th. This has now been rectified, but work must be done to make the running time of the replacement bus more realistic. Buses are allocated 20 minutes to travel between North Berwick and Drem, when 12 would be more appropriate, and, taking the sample of the 17:20 trip on September 19th overall 18 of the 85 scheduled minutes running time for the replacement bus was taken up waiting at stations, even after loading and unloading and undertaking some quite spectacular turning manoeuvres in station car parks. Certainly the attraction of the rail replacement service is diminished when First's 124 bus, which had left North Berwick after the rail replacement time and operated via Dirleton, Gullane and Aberlady, had managed to overtake the rail service replacement west of Longniddry and got into Edinburgh quicker. It also cost £1.25 single fare less!

Screen Monitors

A welcome addition has been the introduction of screen monitors at stations on the North Berwick route advising of train times, both scheduled and actual and thus allowing a sensible choice to be made in the event of late running. Sun visors have been added to allow all-weather viewing.

Membership

We now have around 200 members from around the counties.

Please encourage your neighbours or fellow passengers to join RAGES.

Membership forms can be obtained from committee members, whose names can be found on your membership card.

Reston News

The Scottish Borders Council has released a press notice saying that the Council backs the local rail options for the east coast. It goes on to say that East Lothian and Scottish Borders Councils have passed to the Scottish Executive a consulting engineers' report looking at the possibility of introducing local rail services between Edinburgh and Dunbar and Edinburgh and Berwick-upon-Tweed. If the Scottish Executive agrees to support the project in full it would mean the creation of two new stations, one at East Linton in East Lothian and one at Reston in Berwickshire.

First ScotRail

First Group are to utilise the same address as the previous ScotRail franchisee and therefore all correspondence should go to:

First ScotRail Customer Relations
Caledonian Chambers
87 Union Street
Glasgow G1 3TA

Tel: 0845 601 5929

E-mail: scotrailcustomer.relations@firstgroup.com

Website: www.firstgroup.com/scotrail

Other useful numbers are:

Disabled Assistance: 0845 605 7021

Textphone: 0845 602 0346

Telesales: 08457 550033

General rail enquiries are still through National Rail on 08457 48 49 50.

Passengers are also advised that the First Bus enquiry line number (08708 72 72 71) is exactly that – a BUS enquiry line. So do not expect the enquiry clerks there to be able to help on train services - stick to National Rail.

A passenger charter has been produced by First – available at rail stations, which, it is pleasing to note either retains or improves the conditions offered by the previous franchisee. The offer of a 50% refund in travel vouchers for trains 30 minutes or more late continues to be welcome, although obviously both the operator and passengers would prefer this compensation to be offered as infrequently as possible.

Still got a problem?

For many years, if passengers have been dissatisfied with replies from the rail operator in relation to complaints, the Rail Users Consultative Committee - later to become the Rail Passenger Council for Scotland - could act as a mediator from their office in Glasgow.

Local access to this body has now been lost with complaints now passing through to a central office in Warrington (!) under the control of the appropriately named Mr Ashley Grumble. So if you are dissatisfied with any reply for any rail operator then contact should be made to:

RPC Scotland, Freepost WA1521, Warrington WA4 6GP
Tel: 0845 302 2022 or E-mail: info@railpassengers.org.uk

As this new scheme is in its infancy we are not really able to comment how efficient it will be, but the loss of direct contact to the Glasgow office with their substantial local knowledge is one that we are concerned about. But early days yet ...

Annual General Meeting

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that the very poor performance of the X7 Newcraighall to Haddington link suggested there was limited scope for this type of route where First already ran a through bus service such as routes X6 and X8 Haddington to Edinburgh.

T Thorburn queried the proposed replacement of the former Inter City units on the North Berwick line by diesel Turbostars but Gordon pointed out the substantial costs of the present units and reassured everyone that the Turbostars had reduced emissions compared to older diesel units.

Dunbar News

Trains to Dunbar have recently been disrupted for various reasons in the evening. The main complaint from one of our members is the lack of coordination or accurate information either on the destination boards or on the ground.

It was announced that two GNER services will be withdrawn in December 2005 and replaced by Virgin services which currently pass the station. Virgin hopes that some other trains could call at Dunbar from next June.

The Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) had proposed to scrap the 18:35 hrs Edinburgh to Newcastle train and terminate the 17:30 hrs London to Edinburgh train at Newcastle because they carried too few passengers.

The SRA said Virgin's 18:05 hrs Edinburgh to Birmingham and 13:38 hrs Bournemouth to Edinburgh trains would call at Dunbar and that the GNER 18:00 hrs London train would be re-scheduled to stop at Dunbar.

B Forrest asked about commitment to Reston and East Linton and Gordon advised that if funds were available First would run local trains to Berwick.

Gordon suggested that we should invite him back in a year's time so that he could present First ScotRail's achievements. He was then thanked for his presentation.