

The Rages Rag

Newsletter of Rail Action Group, East of Scotland

www.rages.org.uk

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Progress on Haddington re-opening - Meeting with MSP

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At the Haddington and District Community Council January meeting, it was agreed that we should meet with John Home Robertson, the East Lothian MSP, to discuss how to progress the re-opening of the Haddington rail branch.



Tom Thorburn and John Home Robertson standing on the old railway trackbed studying the RAGES recommendations. Photo: RAGES

Recently, that meeting was set up and our chairman, Tom Thorburn, and our Haddington representative, Russell Darling, met John at Haddington Station Yard.

We sat on the old platform and Russell outlined the presentation that RAGES had given at the Council meeting. In particular we described the three options for a station site:

The first is the original site, now occupied by the Station Yard industrial units.

The second option is to the south of the Roodlands Hospital, as suggested in the 1999 Scott Wilson report

The third option is a more economical one which does not require the A1 to be ripped up and sited at the Ugston Road.

As we walked round the various sites, John noted the position of the hospital and wondered who owned the land which was being suggested. He also noted that the hospital was due to be expanded.

We went down onto the track bed and walked along towards Gateside Avenue, noting that, despite the concerns raised by adjoining residents at the open meeting, the houses were not particularly close to the railway. Obviously trains would not be speeding at this point as they would either be slowing down for or just accelerating away from the station.

When we reached Gateside Avenue, we saw the traffic lights at Gateside Avenue would require to be converted to a level crossing and commented on the fact that the bridge under the new A1 bypass would have to be rebuilt at an angle to allow

trains to pass under the road.

We then went up to the Ugston Road to view the third site option. The railway would be diverted from its original line just before the bypass bridge and go along the north side of the A1 as far as Alderston Road, below Alderston House. Again there was space for a station and car park, but it is further out of town than the second option.

Showing his knowledge of the problems on the East Coast Main Line, John raised the subject of paths into Waverley to allow a Haddington service to function. We agreed that quadrupling of the line from Portobello to Piershill Junction and the re-instatement of the Abbeyhill loop would probably be needed, but that would benefit all services into the east end of Waverley.

As the re-instatement of the Haddington rail branch is one of the East Lothian Council aspirations and is contained in the Labour Group's manifesto, we told John that the next stage was to present our case to the Haddington representatives of the Council. A meeting has been arranged with the Community Council to discuss John Home Robertson's visit and decide on the way forward.

Tom also took the opportunity to raise the lack of progress on the STAG 1 recommendations into the re-instatement of the local service from Edinburgh to Berwick.

After the visit, John Home Robertson said "I am always keen to support good public transport initiatives. The immediate priority for railways in East Lothian is to get better train services for the east of the county - hopefully including the re-opening of a station at East Linton. I know that RAGES are keen on developing longer term ideas for Haddington and it was interesting to look at possible options for a station there, but such an initiative could only be taken forward if it had overwhelming support from local residents."

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.

Seventh Annual General Meeting

For the first time, RAGES held its annual general meeting away from East Lothian. To reflect the Berwickshire membership, it was held at the Reston Village Hall on 7th September. Tom Thorburn, chair, welcomed 19 members and three non-members to the meeting and received 26 apologies. Barrie Forrest was thanked for organising the venue. The minutes of the 6th annual general meeting were accepted.

Résumé of the Group's Seventh Year

Tom expressed appreciation at how Virgin Trains had been receptive to points raised during their first full year of operation in Dunbar, and that First ScotRail have introduced refurbished electric units on the North Berwick line. However ticket collection on the North Berwick line trains remains of concern, as did lack of information over Christmas and New Year services, when cheap day tickets were available over public holidays and the unavailability of First Insight magazines.

Concerns have also been expressed over a number of issues concerning GNER services with a request for the 09:30 hrs ex-Edinburgh to also call at Dunbar.

During the year a presentation was made to Haddington Community Council about the re-opening of the Haddington branch line, whilst the group had responded to three consultation documents.

The RAGES website has been updated and the STAG1 appraisal is with the Scottish Executive for review.

Chairman's Report

Tom Thorburn related his appreciation to all Committee members for their work and reminded members that with the Scottish Parliament and Local Elections coming in 8 months there was ample opportunity to emphasise to politicians the importance of local rail services.

Secretary's Report

Roy Mitchell emphasised the general reliability of the Class 322 units on the North Berwick line. He also welcomed their refurbishment, although failure to provide selective door opening and racks for the First Insight magazine were negative points. The former means that the conductor still has to dash to the back of the train to open the doors. Ticket collection continues to be an issue whilst particular disappointment is levied at the failure of Transport Scotland to fund an improved evening service despite First ScotRail having units available: this is also an appropriate comment for the lack of an earlier Dunbar train as Virgin Trains have train crew and unit available.

Treasurer's Report

Harald Vox circulated the accounts showing funds available of £533.73 at the year end, a reduction from £644.00 last year but still healthy.

Membership Report

Russell Darling reported that membership was now 161, a decline of 38. 27% of the membership was from the Reston area.

Election of Office Bearers

All office bearers were re-appointed unopposed. However, Dunbar still needed a representative whilst Russell had expressed a wish to stand down as editor of *The Rages Rag*.

Guest Speaker

Gary Bogan, First ScotRail Franchise Manager, from the Transport Scotland agency of the Scottish Executive was introduced as our guest speaker.



Gary Bogan. Photo: RAGES

He outlined the key conditions of the seven year franchise, which has a three year opportunity to extend, that First Group had signed for and the SQUIRE regime, a service quality assessment, that demanded high and consistent standards of operation and performance. He raised particular emphasis on the creation of 400 extra jobs, the opening of

training and customer contact centres. Further CCTV installation, a £1m refit of the Caledonian sleepers and improved reliability had also taken place. Work was going ahead to re-open lines between Airdrie and Bathgate, Stirling and Alloa and Edinburgh and Tweedmouth. He also referred to the Route Utilisation Strategy which was underway.

Key questions were asked by the members covered the following topics:

- The misapprehension that a line to Galashiels offered anything to residents in the east of the county
- Delays to the STAG appraisal discouraged improved rail facilities in Berwickshire and East Lothian.
- Contrasts with the excellent service to North Berwick were made with the Dunbar situation with far fewer trains
- Failure to introduce additional evening trains to North Berwick continued to be criticised
- Disappointment continued to be expressed that earlier trains – offered by Virgin - had been rejected by Transport Scotland

Mr Bogan responded well to the questions and said that while he was only responsible for the First ScotRail franchise he was sympathetic to some of these points, but unable to help more. However, he promised to pursue the concerns of the Group when returning to his office.

He was thanked by the chairman.

Transport Scotland is the new national transport agency for Scotland. Their purpose is to help deliver the Scottish Executive's vision for transport, making a real difference for people and businesses using the national rail and road networks. They are responsible for helping to deliver the Executive's £3 billion capital investment programme over the next decade.

Outstanding Customer Care at Dunbar ...

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Allison Cosgrove from East Linton reports the following good news.

After using the Dunbar automated ticket machine to collect several tickets purchased on-line, she had not noticed that the return portion of a ticket from London to Dunbar had not been printed by the machine whilst in the station. However, staff at Dunbar had found the ticket in the machine later and had used the booking reference to track down her original order. They phoned her at home at 07.30 the following day to advise her that the ticket was awaiting collection. She said "I was really grateful for the time and trouble taken by Dunbar staff in this outstanding example of customer care."

She added: "This is a warning to others using these machines to check that you have all your tickets before leaving the station."

... and even cheaper fares!

The Megatrain concept, offering rock bottom fares on certain off-peak rail journeys for pre-booked passengers, has reached Scotland. Initially trialled by Stagecoach on their Portsmouth to London services, Megatrain fares are now available between Edinburgh and Carlisle, Oxenholme or Manchester or between Edinburgh and Dunbar or Morpeth on selected Virgin Train services only. Passengers between Dunbar and Edinburgh can travel for as little as £2.50 return and indeed there are journeys between Edinburgh and Manchester for the same price, resulting in a fare less than a Musselburgh to Edinburgh return.

Travel is on the normal Virgin Train services. Browse on the web at www.megatrain.com or phone 09001 200 300, with the distinct possibility that the phone call may be more expensive than the rail ticket.

Apart from Edinburgh no other destinations have been added to the Dunbar list, but it is worth checking regularly to see if other places will be served eventually. Existing low fares on VirginTrains and GNER services on their websites, telephone call centres or at stations continue to offer good value.

Despite this development RAGES remains committed to press for at least an extra morning train into Edinburgh and a later evening service – a situation borne out at the Annual General Meeting reported opposite.

[Ed: As you would expect the further in advance that you can book, the more chance the tickets will be cheaper. I found a single from Edinburgh to Dunbar or Manchester at £1 for ten days later.]

North Berwick Service News

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Service reliability has continued to be generally good and three of the five Class 322 trains presently in use on the service have been refurbished. At the Community Rail Awards in September 2006 First ScotRail received an award for the quality of this work.

From December 11th most trains between North Berwick and Edinburgh will terminate at Waverley, with just those running to and from Glasgow Central continuing to serve Haymarket. This is due to the needs for a reduction in train movements between Edinburgh Waverley and Haymarket to allow for engineering work during the next phase of the redevelopment of the former. The Newcraighall service will become a shuttle from Waverley with no trains operating through to Bathgate or Dunblane.

Another important feature of the Waverley refurbishment will be from December 27th when most platforms will be renumbered. Final details will be available soon.

Engineering work was programmed at weekends in September, October and November with bus replacements operating and it was pleasing to note that these bus times were publicised at stations on the route. Also welcome is the news that a Ticket Machine is to be positioned at North Berwick as part of shelter and platform upgrading, as ticket collection still continues to be a problem on some journeys. However, First ScotRail have confirmed that there are plans to have ticket machines at Prestonpans and Longniddry later next year.

Local Service from Edinburgh to Berwick

In August BBC's Reporting Scotland did interviews with Paul Ince of East Lothian Council (and a RAGES member) at East Linton and Tom Thorburn, our chairman, at Reston on the local rail service from Edinburgh to Berwick. Our vice-chairman, Barrie Forrest, played a "walk-on" part at Reston.

The interviews were broadcast on Radio Scotland on a morning and an evening news programme and on BBC1's evening Reporting Scotland.

The STAG 1 recommendations are still held up with the Scottish Executive, but we understand that this is due to the ongoing ECML Route Utilisation Strategy consultation.

RAGES has been invited to meet Tavish Scott, MSP and Minister for Transport, along with MSPs, John Home Robertson and Euan Robson, on 1st November. As well as other pertinent issues, we will be raising the delay of the STAG 1 recommendations with Mr Scott.

Membership

membership@rages.org.uk

We now have around 160 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.

GNER's New Looks

During the summer GNER unveiled a contemporary new look for frontline station staff, on-board crews, train drivers, chefs and travel consultants, with the launch of its stylish new uniforms.

The striking navy blue and red pinstripe suits for both men and women has replaced the traditional dark blue checked uniform range, creating a distinctive new look which will also make it easier for passengers to recognise GNER staff.

The new uniform range will now be worn all year round, creating a more consistent image for GNER and will also provide employees with a more practical and durable uniform suitable for working in a busy railway environment.

The original dark blue checked GNER uniform was introduced in May 1997.

GNER also announced that it is to refurbish 103 carriages in its fleet of 125 mph diesel High Speed Trains (HSTs).

The 'Mallard style' refurbishment is based on GNER's award-winning rebuild of its 30-strong electric Mallard trains. It will deliver improved levels of comfort, reliability and customer service levels for passengers travelling on the East Coast Main Line.

The refurbishment of the first of the carriages has started and the first completely refurbished train will enter passenger service in early 2007. The project is due for completion by the end of 2008.

GNER has been awarded a Charter Mark, the Government's national standard for excellence in customer service. GNER is only the second UK train operator to have this prestigious accreditation.

The award is based on a three-stage assessment: review and preparation of evidence; submission of a detailed application pack; and a three-day on-site visit.

New Cross Country Franchise Bidding Begins

Virgin Rail Group (VRG) welcomed the Department for Transport's (DfT) announcement last month that it has been shortlisted to bid for the New Cross Country passenger rail franchise.

From November 2007 the majority of the current Virgin CrossCountry franchise will be combined with a number of Central Trains 'City Link' services, creating a single franchise. This new franchise will build on the successes of Virgin CrossCountry and continue its unique position as Britain's only truly 'national' passenger rail service. It will deliver high quality, high speed services between Scotland and the North East through the Midlands to the South and South West, together with the inter-regional services from Birmingham to Cardiff, Nottingham and Stansted Airport.

In July, VRG submitted its prequalification documents to the DfT detailing its strengths and experience as an operator of franchised rail services, which included:

- Increasing the numbers of people travelling - double the number of people now travel on Virgin CrossCountry than did in 1994;
- Improving performance - the Public Performance Measure (PPM) scores for West Coast increasing 15% and CrossCountry 18% over the last four years;
- Introducing a £2billion fleet of the UK's only tilting trains - with enhanced levels of safety and performance as well as being quieter with lower emissions;
- Giving value for money - the average Standard fare paid per mile to travel on West Coast is 17p and 13p on CrossCountry, compared to an average 44p per mile to travel by car; and
- Greater than ever customer satisfaction - with 84% of Virgin CrossCountry and 90% of Virgin West Coast customers satisfied with their travel experience.

The DfT will shortly issue an Invitation To Tender, containing the complete specification for the new franchise against which all bids will be judged.

Berwick News

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Berwick Borough Council have tastefully created a Berwick Information Centre in a small room within the station. Included in this Information Centre are photographs of the town and an impressive simple to use touch screen computer.

This computer has an up-to-date search facility for bus times to and from Berwick to local villages and towns. Due to his train arriving, our reporter was unable to explore what other information this facility has to offer. All in all, well done to Berwick Borough Council on this investment at Berwick Station.

The Aims of RAGES

- To improve the rail service between Edinburgh and Dunbar with extension to Berwick upon Tweed at a later stage.
- To have East Linton and Reston stations re-opened for active use.
- To improve the level of service to North Berwick.
- To consider the implications with regard to car parking and bicycle storage at stations between Waverley and Berwick upon Tweed.
- To keep under scrutiny the standards of passenger facilities at stations between Waverley and Berwick upon Tweed, including North Berwick, and to draw the attention of the relevant bodies to shortcomings which arise.
- To re-open the branch line from Longniddry to Haddington.
- The group, being environmentally minded, will actively strive to encourage rail travel within its geographical area.