

The Rages Rag

Newsletter of Rail Action Group, East of Scotland

www.rages.org.uk

Issue No. 32 - January 2007

New Dunbar Service

A new service was launched on Monday morning 11 December 2006 at Dunbar station.

Tom Thorburn, RAGES chairman, who was present at the launch and travelled on the train, said "RAGES is very grateful to Virgin's enthusiasm to provide these extra new trains and Transport Scotland for providing the funding. Already this morning service saw 29 passengers on its first day, six of whom were going on to Glasgow. This new 06:29 hrs service will give the people of Dunbar and surrounding area, the opportunity to get into Edinburgh to catch forwarding train services, previously not available."

He also noted that it is hoped that in the summer 2007 timetable, the 06:29 hrs service would be re-scheduled to leave at 06:40 hrs.

Whilst on the train and at the meeting afterwards, Tom was able to discuss our shorter term aims with Chris Gibb, Managing Director of Virgin CrossCountry Trains, and Allan McLean, Communications Manager for Scotland.

Friday nights also saw the start of another new service - 22.54 hrs from Edinburgh to Dunbar.

RAGES asked Virgin Trains if this service could be run on a Saturday night as the last train from Edinburgh eastwards is 19:00 hrs.

We would also remind you that these new services are on a probationary period of a year with a review in May. Good use of these will ensure that they continue next December as a permanent feature.

Virgin Trains press release at the time was as follows.

Dunbar Commuters Gain a New "Early Bird" Train

A pioneering new rail service for Dunbar commuters was flagged off from the East Lothian town by John Home Robertson MSP today. [Mon. 11 Dec.]

The 06:29 hrs Virgin Voyager train to Edinburgh has been introduced to meet a demand for an earlier arrival in the Capital. It runs daily, Mondays to Fridays, and is due to arrive in Edinburgh at 0656 and then continues to Manchester via Carlisle. It also offers connections into First ScotRail trains

from Edinburgh, including at 07:15 for commuters travelling to Glasgow.

Transport Scotland is funding the new service for a 12-month trial, together with a later Fridays only return train leaving Edinburgh at 22:54 hrs for Dunbar from Friday 15 December.

The 06:29 was "launched" by John Home Robertson MSP, who campaigned along with East Lothian Council and the RAGES organisation (Rail Action Group, East of Scotland) for improvements to Dunbar rail services.

"I've been campaigning for improvements to the train service from Dunbar and I'm very pleased by the timetable improvements which have taken place in the last year. I'm delighted that Virgin has worked in partnership with Transport Scotland to deliver this new early morning service and I would encourage local people to make good use of it. If this new service is a success, then it will help to justify further service improvements to meet the needs of a growing Dunbar population," he said.

Malcolm Reed, Transport Scotland chief executive, said: "This new service gives commuters a quality public transport alternative, providing a direct link from East Lothian to stations across the country.

"We welcome the introduction of this service and are pleased with the initiative Virgin has shown. We will watch progress with interest and continue to work closely with our rail industry partners to deliver real benefits for passengers."

Chris Gibb, managing director of Virgin CrossCountry Trains, said: "We welcome the opportunity that Transport Scotland has given us to introduce these new services, which we believe will prove popular with increasing numbers of Dunbar rail users. The expansion of rail journey opportunities from and to Dunbar is the positive result of us listening to what East Lothian people and their representatives have



John Home Robertson "flagging off" the new morning train.

Photograph by Lewis Houghton for Virgin Trains

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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North Berwick Service News

The new winter timetable commenced operation on December 10th with the vast majority of North Berwick trains now terminating at Waverley and passengers for Haymarket are now having to change trains. Although not ideal it was well documented in an excellent December service change brochure that also advised of Christmas services and platform number alterations.

Evening connections have proved more difficult with late running trains from the west resulting in connections being missed. The necessity to transfer from Platform 12 to either Platform 8 (the old 21) or 4 (the old 7) is not one that can be achieved in a couple of minutes. Service reliability has not been particularly impressive either with late running becoming commonplace in the morning peak. It is to be hoped that as more progress is made on the Waverley refurbishment, the delays over Christmas and the early part of January will be reduced.

Another operational feature of the new service pattern was a marked reduction in barrier checking in the morning peak with no tickets being scrutinised on several occasions, something that has continued into the New Year.

The last 322 electric unit has gone in for refurbishment. We still remain concerned at the failure to fit selective door opening, but acknowledge it would be a comparatively expensive modification. However it would hardly break the bank to put in holders so that the First Insight magazine could be distributed on this line - again in December no copies were noted which is regrettable given the useful information, especially on diversions.

At Christmas, Saturday morning peak services were operated on the North Berwick line on 27-29 December before moving on to normal services after 09:00 hrs. This decision seemed appropriate with the morning peak trains having healthy loadings, but not overcrowded. After the usual shut down on January 1st a Sunday service was operated on January 2nd. Given that this is a working day in an increasing number of businesses we would be interested to know whether an earlier start is needed (say 08:20 from North Berwick). Bus services do not kick off until 08:53 from North Berwick on that day and so the chance of using public transport to arrive before 10:00 in Edinburgh is nil.

On Train Fares

From January 14th 2007, First ScotRail advised that discounted tickets would not be available on-train where 'ticket purchasing facilities' were provided at stations. This means that if there is a staffed office or a ticket machine (virtual ticket office) then it is full-priced single or returns to pay to the guard. Given the regular complaints that we receive of a failure to collect fares this is really an admission of defeat that First are not prepared to staff up off-peak trains to allow all fares to be paid on train and to ensure that conductors do what they are paid to do and therefore want to use the threat of being charged the full fare on off peak journeys as a deterrent.

Where there is a staffed station selling all forms of tickets, we see no problem. At Waverley, First ScotRail sell tickets for peak trains at the platform ends to minimise queues. However, we are concerned that everyone at Musselburgh and Wallyford will have to use the one machine to buy their ticket and at other stations *en route* as more become equipped, when evidence suggests that their reliability is questionable. They are also unable to provide the range of payment options that on-train and booking office staff are able to offer. For example the virtual ticket offices do not accept cheques or rail travel vouchers, whilst local authority concession tickets are also not programmed to be issued by the machines. RAGES highlighted to First ScotRail that it appeared from their literature that passengers using their Council Travel Pass would not receive the discount on the train. First ScotRail have advised that the necessary programming will be undertaken in the next few months for concessions, but in the meantime local authority concessionary travel permit holders should pay the conductor/guard as usual if boarding at any unstaffed halt.

On the subject of ticket machines, construction work has started at North Berwick on a virtual ticket office although initial progress seemed very slow with the contractor's only apparent achievement being to block off a dozen or so car parking spaces in the pre-Christmas period. However, RAGES has been assured that the work should be completed by mid-February.

National Entitlement Card

16-18 year olds and full time Community Service Volunteers aged 19-25 who are permanently resident in Scotland can now apply for a National Entitlement Card which will give them one third discount on bus services throughout Scotland and a voucher to obtain a Scottish Youth Railcard. This card gives 33% discounts on most rail fares with similar restrictions to that of the National Young Person's Railcard, but does give a third discount on season and some advance purchase tickets which is not available on the National product. Details can be found by contacting the local authority enquiry line where you live: East Lothian 0870 428 6942; City Of Edinburgh 0131 200 2350; or Scottish Borders 0870 428 8245 or by calling into any library.

Membership

We now have around 160 members from around the counties.

Please encourage your neighbours or fellow passengers to join RAGES. Also see page 3 under Subscriptions.

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

Berwick News

It is a measure of the success of the staff who manage Berwick station that there is very little to report.

This is a station which has a cared-for look and is a pleasure to use. It is totally free from graffiti and the staff clearly take great pride in maintaining a high standard of cleanliness. With staffing levels as they are at present, those in the booking office have time to give clear and helpful advice about the plethora of reduced travel facilities on offer and to search for the ticket which best suits a passenger's needs. The only item of news on the staffing front is that Martin has exchanged the comfort of the booking office for the windier environment of the platform and will now be seen looking after passengers as they arrive and depart, ensuring that the usual GNER standards of safety and service are maintained. In his place, we will be seeing more of Euan's cheerful presence on the ticket counter.

It is always a source of concern to regular users of the station that the troubles which currently affect GNER could result in a reduction in staffing levels, making it impossible for the team to continue to provide the kind of service which they do at present and we hope that there will be no such alterations. These would be a false economy. There is only one ticket machine at the station and machines are fallible. It is impossible to have a discussion about travel options with a machine. We hope that GNER, or whichever operator succeeds it, will not think that a machine is a substitute for a well-informed and motivated member of staff.

The train service has generally functioned well over the last few months, with few significant delays and virtually no cancellations. The new timetable brought few changes.

Not all the services of the Rail Link bus to Galashiels are shown on the departure screens and this matter has been taken up by RAGES with the public transport officer at Scottish Borders Council and we are assured that the matter will be attended to in the next year. Due to changes in Health and Safety regulations, it is now impossible for a bus driver to leave his vehicle to check on late running trains and this has no doubt resulted in some passengers just missing a connection. It is another example of how Health and Safety measures, in their quest for a risk-free environment, actually make life more difficult for many people.

There is still no prospect of any later trains from Edinburgh or Newcastle, nor of any kind of local service to and from Edinburgh, or, come to that, to and from Morpeth and Newcastle. RAGES will continue to press for the provision of a service at a level of frequency and at fares offered elsewhere to other citizens of Scotland. The forthcoming elections, at local and national level, are the passengers' chance to press councillors and MSPs on these points and it is to be hoped that all users of Berwick station will not hesitate to make their views known. It would also be useful to know what kind of structure an independent Scottish government would put in place of the present franchise system.

Dunbar News

A passenger count was carried out at Dunbar on Thursday 26th October as part of the information to be presented at our meeting with Scottish Minister for Transport, Tavish Scott MSP, on 1st November.

As this count was hastily organised, it was agreed at Committee level that we would take a count of the peak service trains. Services counted were: 07:25(South); 07:39(North); 16:20(S); 17:26(S); 17:44(N); 17:50(S); 18:24(S); 18:55(S); and 19:22(S). Passenger numbers from these nine trains were very impressive at a healthy 302 on and 379 off. The main contributor to these figures was the first northbound service (now second since the inauguration of the 06:29 on 11th December) at 07:39 with 271 on and 1 off. Informed sources have informed the Group that on Mondays, the 07:39 picks up a staggering 400 to 500 passengers. It is felt that a full count of all 24 trains (25 on Fridays with the addition of the southbound 22:54 Ex Edinburgh) should be carried out in the near future as further evidence in our quest for additional services at Dunbar. Special thanks to those who assisted in this count go to: Ian Bowman; Allison Cosgrove; Tom Dickson; George Rennie; and Harald Vox especially as the weather that day was atrocious.

Car parking space at Dunbar is very much at a premium, i.e. if you wish to travel after 09:00 then in all probability you will not get a space. The Group requires to re-kindle this subject with East Lothian Council and GNER. It is noted that even all the bicycle racks are full.

Further positive points on Dunbar is that the station remains tidy, vending machines and telephone all working and staff friendly, helpful and courteous.

Subscriptions

Subscriptions are due in April and the usual notice will be circulated with the next Rages Rag. However, at the last committee meeting it was decided that the inevitable has to happen. Due to increased costs, the subscription which has been at £3 since the inauguration of RAGES in January 1999 will be raised to £4. The committee received the mandate to raise it by up to £2 at our first Annual General Meeting, but has resisted it to date.

Most members feel that they are getting value for money and some add a bit extra when paying their subscriptions for which we are always thankful.

Also making this increase necessary is the decline of membership numbers. Since the last issue two members have moved away from the area and sadly three members have died.

I would remind you that for January, February and March, any new members will get these months free.

New Dunbar Service

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said they want.”

He congratulated Mr Home Robertson, East Lothian Council, the South East Scotland Transport Partnership (SESTRAN) and rail users’ representatives from RAGES and Passenger Focus, for promoting the case for the new services and for helping make a success of the additional Dunbar trains that were introduced last year. More frequent departures to Edinburgh and the South were introduced in June 2005 when Dunbar joined the Virgin CrossCountry network as the result of close co-operation between GNER and Virgin.

“We look forward to continuing to work with Transport Scotland, SESTRAN, local authorities, rail users and their representatives, and our partners in the Scottish railway industry, to support the continuing growth of rail travel in Scotland and across the border,” Mr Gibb added.

A review of customer comments on the new services will take place in May 2007.

Asked for comments in mid-January on how the new services were being patronised, Allan McLean of Virgin Trains replied:

“It takes time for a new rail service to build up custom. The extra Dunbar services only started a month ago and Christmas and New Year holidays intervened so it is too early to assess the full success.

“Over the coming months, a clearer picture will build up. I would expect numbers to continue to rise as the availability and advantages of the new early morning commuter train and Friday evening return become more widely known.

“However, we are off to an encouraging start with more customers on most recent mornings than on the inaugural train on 11 December when we counted 29. Some passengers are

travelling on to Glasgow, which could not be reached until 09:25 by train from Dunbar before (First ScotRail's connecting 07:15 hrs from Edinburgh Waverley is due in Glasgow Queen Street at 08:06).

“It is too soon to identify the Friday evening trend but numbers are not yet significant. Time will tell.

“We are monitoring passenger numbers on a daily basis and should therefore be able, with Transport Scotland, to assess consistent performance after the services have settled in for a few months.

“The help of RAGES in publicising the services is welcome.”

Saturday night service?

RAGES enquired of Virgin CrossCountry about the possibility of the late night train to run also on a Saturday, but received the following reply:

“Logically, a late evening service would be Fridays and Saturdays, but Network Rail's requirement to maintain the railway to a high standard with minimal disruption at other times means they have to concentrate work overnight whenever possible, especially on Saturday nights when there's more time in the morning before train services resume.

“As a result it is not currently possible to operate later than 19:00 on a Saturday from Edinburgh. If the Friday service is successful, that strengthens the case, however.”

RAGES does not follow this logic, as the last Saturday night train to North Berwick leaves Edinburgh at 23:07 hrs and presumably returns to Haymarket. A Dunbar train at 22:52 would be up and down the line before the North Berwick service was returning.

Reston News

Our Reston Representative reports that he would have liked to be able to give more positive news about the re-opening of Reston station and a local service.

The STAG 1 (Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance) is at present being reviewed by the Scottish Executive and hopefully then move on to STAG 2.

Scottish Borders Council support the re-opening of Reston Station and a local Edinburgh to Berwick Service. But he feels now is the time for the Council to give the same commitment to Reston as has been given to their Waverley Campaign. At the time, press releases and media interviews were heard or seen weekly by David Parker and his councillors.

Barrie would like to thank members for their support to RAGES and hope that they continue to do so in the future, because without the members’ support there would be no RAGES. On their behalf, he will keep fighting for RAGES aims.

East Coast Franchise

Following the announcement last year that GNER would be terminating its existing franchise agreement, arrangements are now in place for a new franchise to be awarded to commence operation either later in 2007 or early 2008. In the meantime GNER will continue to operate the route under a management contract.

RAGES will be seeking to ensure that the bidders should be considering enhancements to the existing London service by introducing, as a minimum, a train at around 10:00 hrs from Dunbar on Monday to Saturday to Kings Cross and allow passengers to benefit from some of the single operator discount tickets on offer. At present there is a gap from 06:20 to 16:20 Monday to Friday and 06:35 to 17:50 on Saturdays which does not really encourage traffic!