

SARPA Newsletter No.22

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Up train at Caersws. Photo: Gareth Marston

From the Editor

I have travelled on the Cambrian lines, and beyond, on a number of occasions in the past few months: to Leuchars in Fife, to Ludlow, and to Nottingham. I also hope to travel on the forthcoming steam train from Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth and back. There have been a number of delays, but on the whole I have found the performance on the Cambrian main line exemplary: where delays have occurred they have originated elsewhere, and caused knock-on delays on the Cambrian. Last Saturday, for example, a late-running train at Nottingham, carrying a member of the train crew, delayed the departure of a Shrewsbury-bound train. This appears to have then held up the Birmingham to Aberystwyth train, which crawled from signal to signal, and we were 15 minutes late into Aber. However, this was an improvement of a few minutes on our timing at Shrewsbury. I am also informed that in general, timekeeping has been good, since the introduction of the revised timetable at the beginning of the year. Wales and West are to be congratulated on their performance.

Chairman's Message

Chairman's Message.

Back in November 2000, I had a meeting with members of the National Assembly's Transport Directorate in Cardiff, in which I conveyed a number of concerns for the Cambrian Rail user of the introduction of a Wales & Border's franchise. The assumption was that it would be up and running – in full & proper form and not just shadow form – by Winter 2001/2002. The main underlying point I made was that between November 2000 and the time that any investment would come through from the new franchise things could remain stagnant or move backward. At the time I was assuming the Wales & Border franchise would be let; however as we all know it is still not and the latest attempt has gone through a quite phase since the announcement at the end of January till the end of April. As Chris Gibb rightly pointed out at our January meeting, the delay in letting the franchise has seriously delayed improvements to our line. It will now be Summer 2003 at the earliest before the franchise is let and running and a while after that before any real changes can be affected.

Recently coming across my briefing document for the meeting back in 2000 I thought it would be a good idea to see where we were now in relation to how things have panned out and see if my prophecies have come true. I

apologise if this bears any resemblance to any well-known national rail columnists "annual predictions". I list the five main areas of concern as written at the time and a brief update on where the situation is at the moment, 18 months on, in italics.

1. **Progress on re-instating the loop at Dovey Junction.**

CT, Railtrack, WDA and others announced a plan to reinstate the loop at Dovey Junction to allow the possibility of an hourly frequency service. This is important to run a more frequent and attractive service and restore connections onto the coast-line. Our fear is that progress on this will be shelved or delayed with uncertainty over the new franchise until the new franchise is up and running. The new franchise would in effect be holding up improvements.

The current status of this project is that it has been shelved but not for the reasons I feared. The complete and utter failure of the Railtrack organisation is primarily to blame and not the new franchise for the Dovey loop.

2. **The maintenance of all trains as through services to Birmingham.**

Currently approximately half of all passengers on the line use the ser-

vice to travel between Shrewsbury and Birmingham. There is a real need for all trains to be through trains as otherwise a large proportion of the lines user will be inconvenienced by the need to change. The SRA study on the new franchise states that one path per hour between Shrewsbury & Birmingham should be reserved for Chester/Aberystwyth trains. How will this work in practice? Will Aberystwyth passengers have to change as the through path is already taken by enhanced Chester services? (Hourly frequency from summer 2001). Changing at Shrewsbury would be acceptable if Shrewsbury was an "Intercity" station, however it is not.

Our trains still go through to Birmingham but the Chester line has not gone hourly in frequency so the real answer to this point has not been made yet. However some Chester/Aberystwyth services now split at Shrewsbury on arrival from Birmingham, suggesting the way things might be.

3. The allocation of rolling stock from Central Trains to the new franchise.

Overcrowding has been the single largest problem in recent years: CT has provided extra stock this last summer to strengthen some of the more crowded services its impera-

tive that sufficient resources are transferred to the new franchise to ensure overcrowding does not return. This is a complicated issue as CT does not allocate specific stock to the line, it comes from a common user pool. Stock is used part of the day elsewhere in the CT network and extra stock drafted in on summer Saturdays. Our understanding is that the other parts that will make up the new franchise do not have the resources or the ability to rotate extra stock to our line as at present. There is a real danger of going back to chronic overcrowding if this issue is not properly addressed.

The 11 units transferred from CT for the whole of the Chester /Pwllheli/ Aberystwyth/ Birmingham services have proved inadequate already. Summer will allegedly see Wales & Borders draft in more stock, however we will need to see this in practice before making judgment.

4. Passenger Information System.

CT has installed a system linked up to the rest of its area in 2000. This will become "out of date" on the commencement of the new franchise a system linked up to the rest of the new franchise with up to date relevant information is needed.

The CT system is incompatible with

the ex Wales & West "Project Inform" system favoured by Wales & Borders completely as predicted.

5. Multi User Dimension of Current Services.

This is linked to the rolling stock issue. Some Aberystwyth line services whilst east of Shrewsbury "double up" as West Midlands commuter services due to the times they run between Shropshire & the West Midlands conurbation, the services being the 0540 ex Aberystwyth and the 1637 ex Birmingham. Currently CT provides additional carriages on these services to cater for Shropshire commuters. Will the Welsh franchise be able to do so? If not severe overcrowding could result.

So far our fears are being realised, the corresponding 0507 ex Aberystwyth only runs as two coaches and is sadly overcrowded as predicted. Those in the know take advantage of the trains

lengthy wait time at Shrewsbury to transfer to Central Trains 0702 service to Nottingham; however this gets packed out to standing room also on its run into Birmingham. The 1637 still departs Birmingham with four coaches however it runs as a combined Chester/Aberystwyth service so this exacerbates the situation by having Chester line travellers joining the train as well as the previous users. The two-coach unit that carries on to Aberystwyth from Shrewsbury is regularly packed out till Newtown.

Not wanting to blow my own trumpet, but if I'm spotting things like this in what after all was my spare time as an individual eighteen months ago, it's not saying a lot for the ranks of the well paid at the Strategic Rail Authority who cooked up the refranchising process is it? A lot of new thinking and planning is due to come out from the SRA with its new leaders at the helm shortly, let's hope they can learn from their poor planning exhibited in the past.

Electronic Mail

As well as boasting our own website- www.shrewsbury-to-aberystwyth.org.uk a lot of external correspondence is now done by e-mail in line with what the business world is up to. We have found it a useful way to communicate with members in-between meetings and newsletters. So far several of us regularly correspond. It has proved very useful in the recent consultations with the bidders for the Wales & Border franchise in drafting up our presentation and organising members to attend meetings. If people would like to join this network then please contact the Chairman, Gareth Marston at tanygraig@breathemail.net

News in brief

Shrewsbury

Wales & Borders are looking to recruit more staff at the station, specifically Duty Managers, thereby reversing the trend since privatisation. This is interesting when compared with the findings from the recent Rail Passengers Council investigation into First Great Western services, which amongst other things produced a striking graph showing how FGW's train performance nose dived when plotted against their staff cuts and then rose again when they started recruiting more staff.

Also in the pipeline are connecting times being reduced to five minutes instead of seven, and talk of restoring Platform 3 to regular passenger use.

Newtown

The station refurbishment has started at long last, though it is not being done at any great pace. Users will shortly be able to benefit from disabled ramp access, the relocation of Newtown Station Travel's office and improved bus services from outside the station.

Llanbrynmair

The media and the usually ill informed local councillors made a great fuss of Railtrack introducing crossing keepers on a couple of crossings near the village in April, though it was hard to see

what exactly they were up in arms about. Trains no longer slow down at these locations thereby cutting journey times.

Freight

Unofficial sources within the rail industry suggest that freight will return to our line soon, in the form of ballast trains running from Minfordd on the coastline to Cornwall twice a week.

Steam

April saw a successful steam excursion to Tywyn; this will be followed on May 18 by one to Aberystwyth.

Carmarthen line

In April Ceredigion County Council approved their own application to develop more of the old track bed into cycle/bridleway making its reinstatement as a heavy rail line harder. SARPA members had lodged complaints along the lines of pointing out that provision must be made to easily allow the routes conversion back to heavy rail. We were not against any worthwhile temporary use. The generally anti-public transport County Council blundered on regardless with its own agenda and were totally dismissive of the concept that the line could one day reopen.

User aspirations for the Cambrian Lines Timetable

SARPA's aspirations for the Wales & Borders franchise –May 2002.

The list beneath is no way exhaustive or in order of priority: rather a reflection of the issues and concerns about the use of the Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth line, which have been built up over recent years. The 20 aspirations below are listed and followed by a brief explanation. We are more than happy to go into depth about any of these, but have kept the detail deliberately brief at this stage.

Our aspirations are as follows:

1. **Decent connections between Aberystwyth and the Cambrian Coast line and vice-versa.** Currently any journey between say Aberdovey and Aberystwyth involves waits of over an hour at Machynlleth or Dovey Junction. Aberystwyth is the nearest large amenity centre to the communities on the north shore of the Dovey estuary, yet they are effectively cut off from it by the poor connections.
2. **Decent connections between all Cambrian Coast line trains and services to Shrewsbury.** Despite some improvements recently, there are still huge gaps in the timetable where travelers can find themselves stranded at Machynlleth (a station with no refreshment facilities) for over an hour and a half awaiting an onward connection.
3. **Improved connections at Shrewsbury with all radiating lines.** This is a long-standing issue. Currently the good connections traveling to Cardiff or Manchester are complemented by waits of over an hour in the return direction. Though connections to Chester are set to improve. Other journeys such as onto the Heart of Wales line are near impossible without lengthy waits.

4. **Commuter timed service to/from Shrewsbury and possibly Telford from stations in the Upper Severn Valley. i.e. Caersws, Newtown, and Welshpool.** This sort of journey is currently not available: the nearest timed arrival on a weekday into Shrewsbury is at 0916.

5. **Earlier Westbound departure from Shrewsbury (Monday to Saturdays).** Another long-standing issue. Currently from east of Machynlleth, Aberystwyth cannot be reached till c.1120, Barmouth c.1150 and Pwllheli c.1400. No commuting journeys can be made from Welshpool into Newtown either. A whole plethora of journey opportunities are effectively not available or unattractive.

6. **All year round Sunday morning services.** People's travel habits have changed over the years: there is a demand for morning travel on a Sunday all year round, which currently is only catered for in the summer months.

7. **Increased frequency of services generally including Sundays.** Infrequency of service is one of the main reasons given by people in Mid Wales for not using the train. A service every two hours is just not perceived to be meeting modern travel requirements. Regular users also bemoan it as the two-hour gap often results in long waits on return legs of journeys.

8. **A Passenger Information System that works.** The current system installed by Central Trains is, to be honest, as much use as a chocolate fireguard. Passengers deserve up to date real time information and not just to be told when the next timetabled service is due as the current system does. Most

of the stations are unmanned or have no staff presence in the evenings, which makes accurate information points even more crucial.

9. **Elimination of overcrowding.** Another long-standing issue. Running two coach trains at two hourly intervals is asking for trouble. This is a spring, summer, autumn and winter issue and has been well chronicled ad nauseam over the last decade, and is generally easily predicted. Simply stated there has not been enough rolling stock allocated to the line since the end of locomotive hauled services.

10. **Resolution of the conflict of interest with long distance Aberystwyth services doubling as Shropshire/West Midlands commuter trains.** Certain Aberystwyth services, because of the time they run into and out of the West Midlands conurbation double up as commuter trains from Shropshire. This causes widespread overcrowding and discomfort for long distance passengers mixed in with the commuters.

11. **Punctuality levels to be c95%.** Punctuality is a problem due to the lack of capacity at either end of the Aberystwyth to Birmingham run where any delay is multiplied. West of Shrewsbury far too many passing loops have been taken out to guarantee a reliable service and east of Wolverhampton too many trains have to fight their way into Birmingham along a two-track section. The current 80% punctuality level is far from acceptable.

12. **Appropriately laid out and designed rolling stock for the type of traveller using Aberystwyth services.** The current Class 158's have been designed to cram as many seats in as possible; this combined with overcrowding sees catering trolleys that can't come through the train and exits blocked by luggage and cycles because their owners have no choice as where else to put them.

Trains must be designed to cater for more than just bums on seats.

13. **Connecting integrated bus/coach links with through ticketing available between Aberystwyth & Carmarthen, Newtown & Brecon and Welshpool & Oswestry.** These once connecting lines need to have some form of public transport link restored especially between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen, which should be a precursor to the restoration of the route to the national rail network.

14. **Possible station reopenings at Llandre or Bow St, Carno and Hanwood.** Population patterns and travel patterns have altered considerably since these stations were closed in the 1960's. We have identified these three or four as possible contenders for reopening.

15. **Welshpool Station –a proper investigation into how the station's many shortcomings can be overcome.** Since its relocation and rebuilding due to the town's bypass being built a decade ago, there has been a "yes I see what you mean" followed by a shrug of the shoulders approach to the many well documented shortcomings it has: this must end and action be taken.

16. **Creation of a Local Users Railcard.** To encourage local people to get out and use the service more, it should cover the Coastline to Pwllheli also.

17. **Secure car-parking facilities at all stations.** There is currently a mixed bag of facilities; many people from outlying villages in Mid Wales have to travel by car regardless. If they are catered for they might change mode mid journey to rail instead of continuing their journeys by car.

18. **Permanent elimination of speed restrictions at certain unmanned level crossings.** An aggravating and annoying ef-

fect of recent Health & Safety directives. In particular there is one crossing a mile and a half east of Newtown where the line runs alongside the A483. What message is given about train travel when the motorist speeds past a train that has slowed to twenty miles an hour?

19. Station areas including tracks within stations should be clear of rubbish and weeds. More attention must be paid to this: a very bad impression is given out by the state of some stations and it discourages use.

20. Staff levels to be increased, both on-board trains and at stations. For the obvious reasons of customer service, safety, confidence in the service and lasting impression. A ludicrous situation exists at Caersws where formerly until the advent of Railtrack the crossing keepers sensibly doubled up as the station staff. Since 1994 they still sit in the box at the entrance to the platform yet are not allowed to give assistance to customers at the station.

How is this to be achieved?

Whilst we recognise that not all can be done overnight or without significant expenditure, a good starting point would be the immediate commencement of the project to rebuild one of the passing loops at Dovey Junction station and the introduction of an approximately hourly service between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth. Please note that this project has already been planned and money allocated to it (not least from the National Assembly for Wales). Railtrack claimed it did not have the resources to carry out the work and suspended the project in October 2001.

Careful considerations of the implications of this project will show that it solves in part or full no fewer than eight of the above aspirations we list, they are as follows:

Aspiration 1. The doubling of frequency of trains going to Aberystwyth will fill the holes in the cur-

rent timetable so that passengers traveling from Aberystwyth will be able to choose services that connect at Dovey Junction with coast line and passengers from up the coast will have an Aberystwyth bound service without too much of a wait.

Aspiration 2. Likewise by filling the holes in the current timetable the increased frequency of service will see passengers being able to choose a connecting train when traveling from the Shrewsbury end of line and passengers coming off the coast will have reduced wait times at Machynlleth.

Aspiration 3. A greater choice of trains will see wait times at Shrewsbury reduced.

Aspiration 4. There should be an arrival in Shrewsbury with an increased frequency timetable between the current 0654 & 0916 arrivals opening up this journey opportunity.

Aspiration 5. To maintain a regular flow of trains between Aberystwyth and Birmingham for an approximately hourly service an earlier arrival from east of Machynlleth will be needed.

Aspiration 7. No explanation needed

Aspiration 9. Even if all trains with an hourly service were two coaches in length this would in theory increase seating capacity in total for the day on the line.

Aspiration 12. The extra passing loop would help recovery of lost time, especially as it is so close to the Machynlleth passing loop.

It must be stated that the root of a lot of the problems with the Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth line stem from the *stripping of its infrastructure post the 1960's rationalisations*. There are now just four passing loops along the 82 miles of track, thirty years ago there were nine plus Aberystwyth station had three

operational platforms compared to one today. This lack of flexibility causes punctuality problems, planning attractive timetables becomes harder, it limits the lines use for charter traffic, freight traffic and for more passenger trains. Whilst recent talk of investment in our line has been along the lines of restoring one loop, this is not good enough: at least three of the loops ripped out need to be restored.

As a quick fix in part to some of our aspirations it is also possible to run an enhanced frequency service over parts of the line without any infrastructure work. We demonstrated back in 1997 that it was feasible using the then existing timetable (which is almost identical to today's) to run

an approximately hourly frequency service between Newtown and Shrewsbury with some additional services as far west as Machynlleth. The outputs are not as extensive as the Dovey Junction loop but this could be done as an interim measure pending the loops completion.

I can also mention what we don't want to see from the new franchise holder namely maintaining the status quo, a token London service involving a circuitous route using current rolling stock and viewing line speed improvements as the be all and end all of investment.

Freight on the Cambrian?

When in the north of Scotland recently, I was able to see a little of the lines north of Inverness. A daily freight train runs to Georgemas Junction, between Wick and Thurso. Included in the train are container wagons, carrying closed containers for Safeway, as well as closed vans. At the junction there was a mobile crane, used to transfer loads to road

(presumably including the containers).

Could we see this for Safeway at Aberystwyth? Although the north of Scotland is considerably more remote than Mid Wales, is there the possibility of traffic of this sort being developed?

Denis Bates



SARPA MONTHLY MEETINGS 2002

The committee meets on a monthly basis at a public venue, which is open to all who wish to take part. It is intended to be an open forum for views and discussions on the rail service in Mid Wales as well as just a committee meeting. We would like to see more ordinary members (and new ones) come along: there is always a danger that the views of SARPA will be those of the regular attendees rather than of the membership as a whole.

So far in 2002 we have had guest speakers

from Wales & Border Trains, namely Managing Director Chris Gibb (January) and Area Manager James Widdowson (May). Simon Thomas MP also attended our January meeting. Our 2001 AGM in September was attended by Lembit Opik MP and Rail Passenger Council Wales Chairman Paul Harley. There will be guest speakers at this years AGM, so it's not just a talking shop for the same old people please come along and contribute.

The venues and times are as follows: we meet where access by rail is practical.

Saturday 1 st June	Railway Hotel	Borth	1315
Tuesday 2 nd July	Red Lion Hotel	Caersws	1845
Tuesday 6 th August	Bell Hotel	Newtown	1900
Saturday 7 th September (Note also AGM)	The Old College	Aberystwyth	1330
Tuesday 1 st October	Royal Oak Hotel	Welshpool	1915
Tuesday 5 th November	Bell Hotel	Newtown	1900
Saturday 7 th December	Wynnstay Hotel	Machynlleth	1300

Contributions from people who can't attend are more than welcome.

Support your local Officers!

The Chairman, Gareth Marston, and Secretary, Rachael Jones, have entered this year's Santa Fun Run to take place in Newtown in December. If any other SARPA member would like to enter and run together as a SARPA team, please obtain a form from Newtown Dial-a-Ride, Ladywell Centre, Newtown 01686 610703 or look at their website www.newtownanddistrictdialaride.org

Closing date for applications is July 22nd; there are a limited number of places.



2002 SUBSCRIPTIONS

The membership year runs from January to December so once again we are asking for membership to be renewed. The membership fee is to remain at £3.00 for individuals and for organisations. Please make any cheques payable to SARPA. Donations are of course welcome.

- All members will receive our quarterly Newsletter free of charge.
- SARPA will lobby for better rail services as it has always done (and its predecessor CRUG).
- Act as a watchdog to safeguard the line's future.
- Meet in public once a month at towns and villages along the line.

The majority of our expenditure goes towards the cost of publishing and distributing our newsletters. We subscribe to the Shrewsbury Rail Users Federation (£10 for 2001/2002) and may occasionally have to pay for room hire. Any surplus is held as an emergency fund for the future. None of the officers gains financially in any way from SARPA.

The stalling of the proposed hourly service and the disappointing (to say the least) Strategic Rail Plan show there is a strong need for the interests of passengers to be represented at a local level. The battle for a decent modern European style railway has still to be won please help us fight for this.

I / we would like to join SARPA/ renew our membership for 2002.

Please delete as appropriate.

Name(s):

Address:

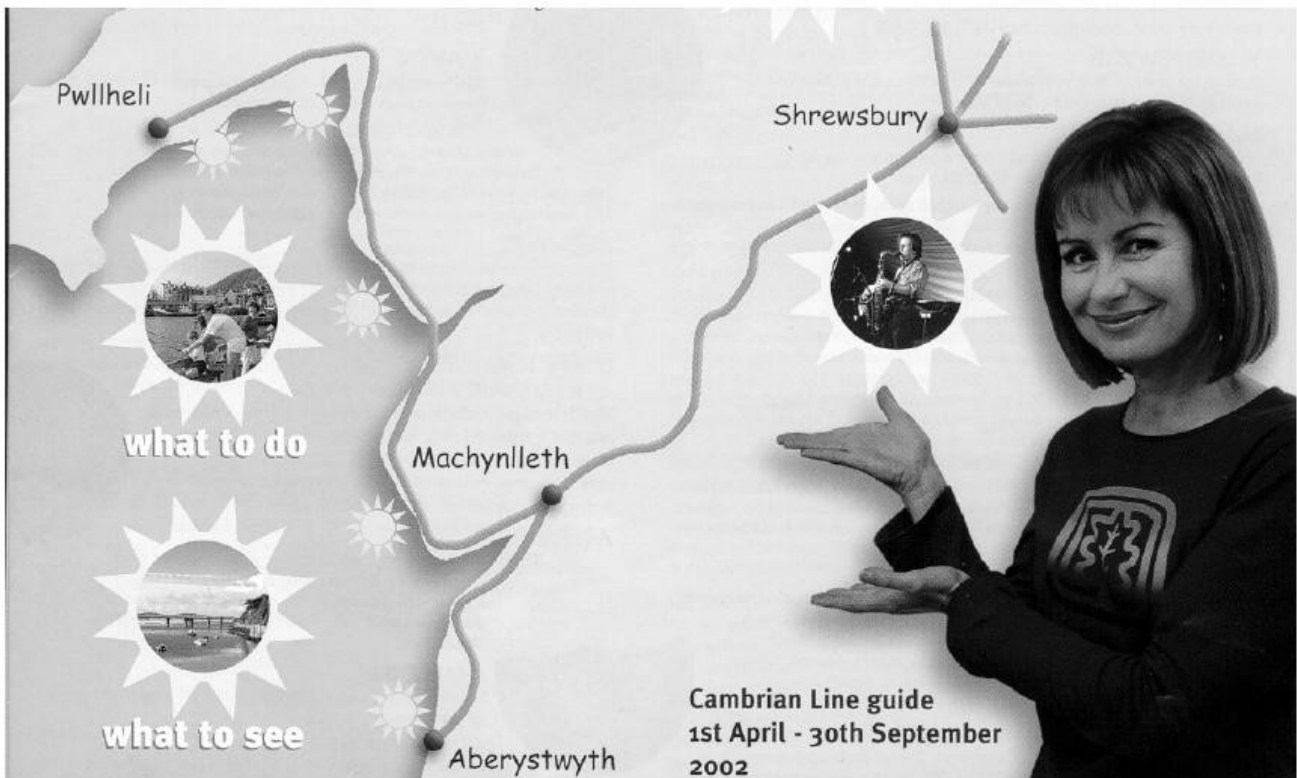
Telephone:

Email address:

Please cut out and send to:

SARPA Membership c/o Ivor Morris: 2 Dingle Rd, Welshpool, Powys.SY21 7QB.

SARPA: www.shrewsbury-to-Aberystwyth.org.uk



Heulwen ar eich hyni—Sunshine along the Line. The Wales and Borders Summer Guide.

OFFICERS OF THE ASSOCIATION

The current officers for the Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passenger Association (SARPA) are as follows:

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