

SARPA Newsletter No.21

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Membership 2002

Membership fees for 2002 are now due. See the panel on the last page of this newsletter.

Chairman's Message

Firstly a personal statement. At the beginning of the month I took up a position as a committee member of the Rail Passengers Committee for Wales. The Rail Passenger Councils, formerly the Rail Users Consultative Committee, have been set up by government to protect the interests of passengers. The position is paid and involves a commitment of a few days per month on average; impartiality and fairness are expected and a member cannot just represent and lobby for the interests of his or her particular line. I hope that you will agree with me that I can continue in my role as SARPA Chairman which I have done since February 1999, and that the two roles do not necessarily clash. I, like most people I know, do not travel by rail in a Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth bubble but travel across the country, so uniform standards of service on the rail network as a whole are what I believe in. Gillian Wright, HOWLTA's Chair is also an existing RPC Wales member. If any member has any questions about this please feel free to contact me.

The publication of this newsletter was held back to cover the Aberystwyth meeting on the 5th January, and the launch of the Strategic Plan, so I hope you find it topical. Clearly after much talk real investment in our line seems to have gone on the back burner as far as central government in London are concerned – the National Assembly has more of the right ideas but lacks the means to make them happen due to its limited powers. If we are really serious about having a rail network fit for the 21st Century all our efforts must be redoubled: the disappointment of the Strategic Rail Plan for Wales was backed up a week later by the announcement of a bucket load of road schemes across Wales. A couple of battles have been won in the war against misguided transport policies but the war must continue. So I hope as many of you as can will participate in what SARPA does over the next year and make our voices heard - the Aberystwyth meeting was a good start.

Gareth Marston, Newtown 24th January

SARPA meeting in Aberystwyth, Saturday January 5th 2002

Around 25 to 30 people attended the meeting held in the Cambrian Hotel Aberystwyth, including Ceredigion MP Simon Thomas (ST) and Wales and Border Managing Director Chris Gibb (CG). The meeting was most useful as it gave CG the opportunity to hear the concerns of ordinary passengers on our line and relay to them his plan of action since W & B's takeover in mid October. Those present agreed that CG made a good impression with his in depth knowledge, attention to detail, his enthusiasm and will to get things done.

Naturally the punctuality problem occupied a lot of the discussion, the causes of which are multiple. Significant ones are the failure of Railtrack to upgrade Shrewsbury to Wolverhampton to 90 mph running with Central Trains trying to operate a 90 mph timetable over a 70/75 mph stretch of track, rolling stock reliability problems and train regulation problems with Railtrack signallers. To improve reliability a revised timetable has been brought in from the 14th January. The aim is to improve reliability by timetabling everything between Shrewsbury and Wolverhampton back to 75mph running and to create a spare unit at Shrewsbury to act as cover. This has a down side in that to create the spare unit at Shrewsbury some services on the Chester line and ours have been altered. The 1137 Birmingham New St to Pwllheli will now run to Chester instead, the 1427 departure from Machynlleth will still run by using one of

the units currently added to eastbound services to strengthen them to four coaches. This loss of a train was accepted as a necessary by-product of recreating a reliable timetable. The first train of the day is retimed earlier, leaving Aberystwyth at 0507 now.

Can any members with observations on timekeeping under the new timetable please let Gareth Marston know.

CG made it clear that his task over the next twelve months was to make the current service as workable as possible, as well as bringing certain areas up to the standard of other W & B routes. As well as implementing a plan to improve punctuality, further short-term measures included the introduction of a team of mobile cleaners based at Newtown, a change in the company running the catering trolleys, Machynlleth depot being able to affect a wider range of repairs and servicing of units on site and the installation of new toilets and air conditioning systems on board units.

Changes when the summer timetable comes in will see the line upgraded to Alpha line status. This means that all trains should have seat reservations available, catering trolleys will run the whole length of the journey and air conditioning will be fully functional. In addition the removal of some seats will

see additional luggage space created, more four coach formations will run (though he didn't go in to how this would be achieved) and there will be an additional Fridays only train up the coast connecting with the 1637 from Birmingham returning to Machynlleth in time to connect with the last train to Aberystwyth. The creation of refreshment facilities at Machynlleth station is to be investigated and the upgrading of the passenger information system is scheduled.

Looking longer term CG expressed the desire for our line to trial the replacement system for the RETB signalling system currently in use since 1987. This should occur in the next couple of years; significantly there was mention that this would be a golden opportunity to reintroduce loops (in the plural) along the line. Signalling costs and signal engineer's time are the constraining factors, not actually the physical laying of track. The implication is that it would be easier to "wire in" a couple of new loops at the same time as the whole line had to be done anyway.

The stalling of the hourly service was discussed. ST reiterated his full backing to seeing this project go forward, this project receives universal

backing from local politicians of all colours and CG is also a supporter of it. Yet nothing is being done as Railtrack claims a lack of resources to do the work. CG's take on it was that it should be possible to find someone to do the work outside of Railtrack, but ominously it depended on support from the SRA if it was to be achieved.

On the wider point of improvements that were raised from the floor, CG made the point that if the W & B franchise had been let as originally planned (and if National Express had won) improvements would already be happening. The delay in letting the franchise has led to delays in improvements as the current financial set up of W & B makes it very hard for any significant investment to happen. ST backed this and stated that Wales needed to control its own transport budget and not be dependent on London.

A request made by us for CG to look into Rail Passenger Partnership funding for an earlier westbound service from Shrewsbury would not be pursued as W & B did not have the rolling stock to facilitate this service without taking stock off existing services. CG said there was a shortage of rolling stock nationally and any extra resources had to be prioritised, the Cardiff Valley lines being the winner recently.

Strategic Rail Authority – Rail Strategy or should it be election strategy?

Monday 14th January saw the launch of the SRA's long waited strategic plan. As pre-advertised it proved to be in true New Labour fashion: a re-announcement of already completed and under way projects combined with some relatively minor new items. It did however prioritise which projects were to be completed to what timescale and also dropped completely some others. The vast majority of the projects (and the money allocated to them) were concerned with the South East of England, the excuse being that 7 out of 10 current rail journeys start or end in London. What was increasingly clear was that the regions (including Wales) seemed to be short changed on the investment going to be spent over the next ten years and that the end result was not going to be the European style railway that we all want (and the country needs), at least not in Wales.

Though £33.5 Billion of public money over ten years sounds a lot it will not deliver the railway that is needed, what it will deliver – and has been prioritised to make happen- is a range of noticeable improvements to commuters in the South East and some Intercity lines, timed to take place before the next general election. The cynics amongst us would say that the aim of this is hopefully to bring transport off the boil as an issue before campaigning for a third Labour term

starts - at least in the seats newly won by Labour in 1997.

Reaction in Wales has been one of anger and disappointment that so many obvious improvement schemes have been ignored or dropped. The National Assembly set out a Transport Framework for Wales at the end of 2001: of its major recommendations for Wales a mere handful found their way into the SRA's thinking. The Rail Passenger Council for Wales also expressed disappointed concern for the "mishmash" from Central Government.

In terms of how our line fits into the schemes of things, one specific mention was made: under the heading medium term (2005-2010) there is reference to line speed improvements between Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury. I can hear your groans. How many years has this old chestnut been promised for us in lieu of proper investment? The hourly service – conspicuous by its absence, additional rolling stock, station improvements and station reopenings all missing. Even schemes to alleviate congestion around Birmingham, which affects our services as well as nearly everybody else's, have been deferred to beyond 2010.

Is there a way forward? The enhanced Rail Passenger Partnership

fund for small schemes seems to offer a glimmer of hope, and the creation of the proper Wales & Border franchise by early 2003 with the hope that the successful bidder has a package of improvements up their sleeves is another ray of light. Significantly there are dark mumblings about our friends at the Treasury wanting the successful bidder to be one that offers the best value for money. In other words do it on the cheap: remember Wales & West's reputation under the stewardship of Prism? SARPA member and MP for Montgomeryshire Lembit Opik asked a written parliamentary question to Steven Byers about the lack of investment in Mid Wales. The response

was that it would be reviewed. SRA Chairman Richard Bowker has stated publicly that the plan is just a start and will evolve and be amended.

This announcement confirms two things: firstly that SARPA is needed as strongly as ever to stick up for our line, and secondly that the National Assembly should be given control of the transport budget in Wales including the establishment of a Welsh Passenger Transport Authority. The Assembly's Transport Framework for Wales, though by no means meeting everyone's expectations, is streets ahead of what Victoria St, London has on offer.

The Rail Passengers' Council of the UK aims to monitor Britain's rail services and press for improvements. Its site - www.Onthetrains.com - aims to monitor the services and press for improvements. Members are encouraged to discuss issues with a network of people with similar concerns or requirements. This site is only a trial at present, for use on Scotrail and Virgin Crosscountry services.

Meetings 2002

Tuesday 5th March	Royal Oak Hotel	Welshpool	1915
Tuesday 2nd April	Wynnstay Hotel	Machynlleth	1915
Tuesday 7th May	Bell Hotel	Newtown	1900
Saturday 1st June	TBC	Borth	1315
Tuesday 2nd July	Red Lion Hotel	Caersws	1845
Tuesday 6th August	Bell Hotel	Newtown	1900
Saturday 7th September	Cambrian Hotel	Aberystwyth	1330
Note also AGM.			
Tuesday 1st October	Royal Oak Hotel	Welshpool	1915
Tuesday 5th November	Bell Hotel	Newtown	1900
Saturday 7th December	Wynnstay Hotel	Machynlleth	1300

Letters to the Editor

Sir,

May I be permitted through the SARPA newsletter to enlighten members of some happenings at the Welsh end of the Shrewsbury-Aberystwyth line. Ceredigion Highways have applied for planning permission to convert the disused trackbed from Aberystwyth to Ystrad Meurig (the old Strata Florida station site) into a Cycleway/footpath.

The application was heard on the 14th November and was deferred for further consultations with interested parties i.e. Environment Agency. There were many objections from landowners/local people about infringement of their privacy, security issues, noise etc etc BUT the most important of all reasons for rejecting the application seems to have by passed everyone RETURNING THE RAILWAY BACK TO ITS FORMER USE...AS A PUBLIC RAILWAY.

The road infrastructure in this part of Wales is sadly lacking, the roads just were not meant for huge lorries and an endless stream of cars, caravans and motorhomes. I have lodged an objection on this basis, and hope that maybe just maybe, someone will have the foresight to realise that one day soon we will all need our railways even more than we do now.

If you would like to see the trackbed safeguarded for future return to rail use then may I suggest you write/

email anyone who has any influence, i.e. Local MP, local Welsh Assembly member (if you are in Wales) and above all Ceredigion planning Authority at:-

Mr Bryan Thomas,
Director,
Cyngor Sir Ceredigion,
Penmorfa,
ABERAERON,
Ceredigion,
SA46 OPA

Quoting Application number
A011057CD

The more letters they get the more they will listen!.

Nigel Bird,
Brynhir, Llwynygroes,
TREGARON,
Ceredigion
SY25 6PY

Heard recently on the passenger information system at Newtown (and Welshpool): on pressing the button a voice said "welcome to the Jewellery Quarter the next train to Great Malvern is..."

Dear Sir,

I am writing to you in response to your Chairman's message in the latest edition of the SARPA newsletter, in particular in what you say about Railtrack, or rather ex-Railtrack. I too am not in mourning at the demise of this outfit. Who's going to bother to mourn them; it was my misfortune to work for that lot. I now work for the administration so I would be very grateful to you if you would not reveal my identity. I was never happy working for Railtrack. B.R. wasn't all bad, and if they'd received all of the money that Railtrack has had since 1994 then B.R. could have done wonders with our railway network. They were sadly under-invested since the end of the second World War ended by successive governments.

Railtrack have never done a proper job since 1994, because all

they were interested in were their big shareholders, making profits was their prime concern. It took the tragic accident at Hatfield to find Railtrack out. By the way the Southall accident was caused by driver error, not Railtrack. In response to what Mr. Haslam says in his letter to you about Birmingham New Street Station being congested badly since the Hatfield tragedy I would like to say that Birmingham has been suffering from congestion since the original Snow Hill Station was closed as a main line station in 1967.

Name and address supplied.

P.S. The big shareholders and the Tories are all complaining about what Mr. Byers has done to Railtrack, but let's face it: he had to do something about them, and let's not forget it was the Tories that created Railtrack. Not a good idea, was it?

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

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Newsletter Editor: Denis Bates, 86 Maesceinion, Waun Fawr, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 3QQ. Tel. 01970-617667. E-mail deb@aber.ac.uk

Shrewsbury Rail Users Federation Representative: Roger Goodhew: 12 Granville St, Shrewsbury, Shropshire. SY3 8NE. Tel. 01743 358873.

Sir,

I was interested to read in Newsletter No.20 (p.7) about rolling stock in Mid Wales. As an occasional traveller on the Cambrian line, I gain great pleasure from the journeys, and am always glad when I ride in a Class 158, the best design of all the units.

The interior is spacious, the seats comfortable, and, most importantly, there is a wide panoramic view

through the long range of windows on both sides. By comparison the 170's have too many internal obstructions, a restricted view, and from some seats a very poor outlook indeed. It would be interesting to hear the opinions of other members.

Edward Dorricott
6 Frederick Road
Sutton Coldfield
West Midlands B73 5QW

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.