

Shrewsbury
Aberystwyth
Rail
Passengers'
Association



Newsletter
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The 1409 from Birmingham International to Aberystwyth on the 7th September arriving at Newtown.
Photograph: Gareth Marston.

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This is the quarterly newsletter of the Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passenger Association. Contributions are welcomed from members and non-members about the mid Wales rail scene. Views expressed in it are those of contributors and not necessarily representative of the Association and its Officers as a whole. Information provided is published in good faith, but the Association cannot accept responsibility for any loss or damage arising therefrom. The Editor reserves the right to abridge or amend copy.

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Chairman's Message

I think it's fair to say that most of our group has been more than a little dismayed at the long running dispute over guards' working arrangements between the RMT union and Southern Rail, a subsidiary of Govia Thameslink (GTR). There has been a general feeling that the union has a point and that changing the status of guards, essentially in the interests of cost cutting, will not end well.

Populist opinion likes to portray the situation as a disagreement as to who should operate the doors on trains. Whilst this is indeed part of the picture, it is in no way the whole one, but it does allow the media to paint the RMT as being somewhat petty. In truth the whole scenario is much deeper, requiring a fundamental re-think of the role of on-train staff.

At present - and not too many people are aware of this, the guard is actually in charge of the train and is the person responsible for its safe operation. In the old LMS Railway Rule Book, from 1933, there is a whole section devoted to "Trains Stopped by Accident, Failure, Obstruction or Other Exceptional Cause". The guard's duties in the various circumstances as laid down in Rules 179 and 180 are really quite onerous and carry heavy responsibility, quite aside from the business of dispatching trains at stations. Whilst the advance of technology has undoubtedly made things easier in many respects, the principle that trains bashing into each other can result in death and injury has not changed at all. Guards are trained to follow the correct procedure and make sure that collisions are avoided in exceptional situations. They are also there to assist the public in such scenarios, which is why they are important and mandatory on passenger trains.

The proposals to change the role of passenger train guards seem to emanate from DfT, rather than from the franchise operators themselves. It seems to be another case of people who know very little about railways or railway operation trying to throw in a cost cutting measure which has not been properly thought out. The intention is that there should still be on-train staff but they will have no safety training and presumably will not be permitted to disembark from the train and walk along the track in the course of their work. They will just be there for the purpose of customer services and revenue protection - when they are actually there. It will no longer be mandatory to have a member of staff

other than the driver on board, which has serious implications for the personal safety of passengers, especially the disabled and other vulnerable people. The importance of safety trained rail officials being present cannot be stressed enough when it comes to assisting such passengers or deterring anti-social behaviour by others.

Since privatisation, this lack of understanding of railway operation has led to “old fashioned” types of accident recurring. Two examples spring to mind immediately; Hatfield: Broken Rail; Tebay: Runaway Wagon. These were some of the misfortunes which plagued early railways. I would sincerely hope that the guards will stay in place and we will not see a return to trains which have broken down being hit by other trains. The old rule book was devised in such a way for a reason - to ensure safety - and in many respects it was pressure from the Board of Trade as a result of accidents, rather than the railway companies themselves which brought this about.

Of course, Driver Only Operation (DOO) is already in use elsewhere in the UK, in London on the Underground, for instance. However, what works on the Tube will not necessarily work on railways which pass through seriously rural areas with little habitation and no railway staff for many miles, as in parts of Wales. Urban railways are a whole different ball game, with the majority of stations still being extensively staffed.

For themselves, GTR are pursuing a policy that is behind the times and ignores the reality of the modern railway. Despite being first introduced in the 1980s DOO is still only in use on a third of the national rail network. Since that time however there has been a massive increase in rail use. For example, in the last 15 years alone passenger numbers on Southern have increased by over 64% from 116.1million to 191 million a year. This huge rise is replicated throughout the UK and inevitably increases the risk to passenger safety at the platform / train interface and with more passengers we obviously need more staff, not less.

Meanwhile the Rail Safety Standards Board seems to have let the cat out of the bag when it announced that the attraction of DOO is based on cost savings, rather than safety. Specifically RSSB commented that savings come from “.....employing fewer staff, and from replacing guards with cheaper non-safety critical on-train staff.”

The Department for Transport (DfT) has not been too helpful either, with Peter Wilkinson, a senior official reported as saying at a public meeting “Over the next three years we're going to be having punch ups and we will see industrial action and I want your support.” He suggested that trade union members “...can't afford to spend too long on strike and I will push them into that place. They will have to decide if they want to give a good service or get the hell out of my industry.”

Well, it's not “his” industry. It's ours. We pay for it. If it doesn't serve the public properly then it's doomed. Dr Beeching and his masters neglected this simple fact and the railways fell apart, which at the time was part of the intention.

The whole episode is something of a disaster in workplace relations, born out of arrogance and hubris on the part of DfT and GTR, and they could both take a lesson from history at a time when trade unions were much more powerful. Back in the early 1960s, the railway was dispensing with steam traction and the question arose as to the fate of the boilermakers employed by the Motive Power Department. On the Eastern Region the solution was beautiful in its simplicity, the District Motive Power Superintendent suggested that to avoid redundancy, they were retrained as diesel engine fitters and the idea was put tentatively to the Union. The plan was accepted and went through without a hitch.

Thankfully, Arriva Trains Wales have stated publicly that they will not implement DOO during their tenure of the Wales & Borders Franchise. However, there are only two years left until it is re-let. We must keep a good look out for the role of guards being quietly undermined and degraded under the new franchise agreement.

Angus Eickhoff
Llidiart Wood,
Welshpool

October 2016

News in Brief

Shrewsbury

The replacement London Midland franchise will include the restoration of the second semi fast train between Shrewsbury and Birmingham in December 2018. This was withdrawn by the SRA in 2006 and has severely restricted the usefulness of train services and growth on this corridor ever since.

Increasing numbers of Mid Wales students are opting to attend Shrewsbury Sixth Form College. This September has seen a significant increase in educational commuters from the upper Severn valley into Shrewsbury, using the 0630 service from Aberystwyth.

Welshpool

ATW gave verbal figures to the line Liaison Committee at their July meeting indicating that growth in usage in the upper Severn valley stations, including Welshpool, had been around 20% since the introduction of extra trains in May 2015 up to March 2016.

The 0854 service to Birmingham International on weekdays is regularly departing with people from Welshpool standing this summer. On summer Saturdays this is strengthened to 4 cars; on weekdays it's a 2 car train as far as Shrewsbury. The length of the stand is 24 minutes longer than times considered as passable for commuters into regional cities, given in recent consultation documents as 15-20 minutes.

Forden

The 1230 Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury on Saturday 20th August hit a fallen tree, smashing several windows; fortunately there were no injuries reported.

Newtown

A female passenger was seen having an "attack of the vapours" this summer. Having arrived at 0915 for the 1042 train to Birmingham she was told she could catch the 0940 train and change at Shrewsbury and get to her destination an hour early. She couldn't possibly change trains at Shrewsbury because of her "heavy luggage"; despite being told it was an easy cross platform connection she opted to stay in Newtown till the 1042, and was seen pacing up and down the full length of the platform pulling her "heavy luggage" behind her for the whole time!

Bow St

Concerns have been raised regarding the proposed stations' impact on revenue collection and on punctuality. A stop at Bow St would destroy any recovery margin in an already tight turnaround at Aberystwyth, and the consensus is that the Conductors would not have time to collect all fares from Borth, operate the doors at Bow St and collect fares from Bow St into Aberystwyth before arrival.

The scheme's promoters seem woefully unaware of the downsides, believing it to be a simple case of opening a station, without taking into account the wider impact it may have. In reality ticket barriers may need to be installed at Aberystwyth and extra passing loops put in on the line which would severely affect any business case. SARPA has called for a proper development plan for the whole Cambrian lines that looks at issues holistically, and make decisions in the best interests of the whole line - not just at a local level.

Interruptions in service

"Arriva are back!" was the comment from one passenger as the Cambrian had its worst summer for disruption in many years. Perhaps a little disingenuous given what actually occurred, but reputations are not easily lost....

All trains ground to a halt at 0730 on the 30th July due to a telecommunications fault, meaning that none of the level crossing phones (100 +) on the Cambrian could connect to the signallers in Machynlleth. Services were suspended for safety reasons until c.1700, after a replacement part had been driven over from Nottingham. Tempers became frayed at Barmouth, and a stranded unit was allowed to move ECS to Machynlleth due to “public order issues”. The railway letting customers down at times of disruption was again to the fore, with PIS screens not showing correct information, and worst of all National Rail Enquiries telling callers that trains were running normally from Newtown (which they weren't). A couple of passengers from Barmouth had managed to get lifts to Newtown, only to find no trains running.

Other notable incidents this summer included a Network Rail train broken down at Abermule for a couple of hours, blocking the line, and a culvert becoming blocked near Welshpool due to flash flooding leading to trains being suspended. However, the ongoing issue was trains being cancelled due to “a shortage of drivers” or as ATW later called it “ongoing operational issues”. It seems that ATW management have been expecting drivers to work overtime so that their colleagues could take contracted holidays for quite some time, and this summer drivers have not been volunteering.... leading to train cancellations which have mainly affected the smaller depots on ATW's network. Whilst bus replacements were put on the coast due to the length of time between trains, Cambrian mainline passengers were expected to catch the next train. People have been very coy, but it seems this was some form of organised refusal to volunteer for overtime by the drivers' union ASLEF. People in other industries are not normally asked to work overtime so their colleagues can have contracted holidays, firms usually operate at reduced capacity or hire in temporary staff as cover. Rumours of some sort of temporary agreement between management and the unions have filtered through since the August Bank holiday, though it appears there's no long term solution to the issue as we go to press.

There are currently two drivers under training to be based at Machynlleth. However it will be several months before they are fully trained and able to make a difference, and random cancellations may continue over the winter months

Barmouth Bridge

Network Rail (NR) has produced a study for work to be carried out on Barmouth Bridge. The current steel part of the Grade II Listed Structure was installed around 1900, to replace an earlier drawbridge-like opening span. Extensive repair work was carried out in the early 1980s to counteract the effects of a marine boring worm on the timber section and the line over the bridge was closed for several years.

There were site visits by NR engineers in 2015, leading to a “High Level Options Report” and the project has been divided into two sections:- 1) Urgent Works and 2) Development Works.

There is presently a scheme in development for the repairs, which includes replacing many rivets in the steel spans. Detailed design work by NR is expected to be in place by autumn this year for presentation to Cadw and Local Authorities. At present, work is scheduled to start in spring 2017. There will have to be contingency plans as there are considerable unknowns with regard to the work and it will need to be determined exactly what levels of engineers possession will be required and for how long. Further work will be scheduled for 2018.

From Charlie Hulme's North Wales Coast railway website.

On October 4th fire on the bridge caused its closure for several days.

Barmouth

On 28th September a unit with a damaged drive shaft needed to be moved to Cardiff for repair. This was effected at Barmouth. because this is considered the best location for such a move, thanks to headshunt there, a relic of the former goods yard, where end-on loading is possible..

From Charlie Hulme's North Wales Coast railway website.

No change in the routes for the new Wales franchise

The Welsh Government has announced that there will be no change in services covered under the new Wales franchise. It added that there may be services to new destinations, such as Bristol and Liverpool, if paths can be found.

The fate of the first generation Eurostar sets

Away from the Cambrian, we have been rather astonished to read that the first Class 373 "Eurostars" are actually being scrapped. Presently they are stored on a closed section of HS1. OK so they might have finished their useful work on services between London and the Continent but they are modern and very fast and much younger than the Great Western HSTs which have been promised a new life in Scotland. Also, they are built to the UK loading gauge. In a time of nationwide rolling stock shortages and growth in rail use, it seems totally bonkers to withdraw them for scrap. Surely they could be found a useful role within the UK, after suitable refurbishment? Especially with all these electrification schemes about. Given that they were originally fitted with 3rd Rail equipment for current collection, they could even be found a role somewhere in the south. [

The mere idea of a "closed" section of HS1 is in itself a bit of an eye opener, given the cost of railway infrastructure and the number of other schemes which would have benefited from the investment to improve or reopen. We could remark in the same vein about Waterloo International, closed after just 13 years service and replaced by the humongous Pigs Breakfast that is now St Pancras. One presumes there is one rule for the South East, where rubbish infrastructure planning seems par for the course and another for the rest of the network, where the most extraordinary hoops have to be jumped through even to open the most basic station.

Network Rail

We have read reports with interest - and puzzlement - that Sir Peter Hendy, the chairman of Network Rail apparently thinks that the national network should be run more like London Underground. Well, the Tube and indeed the Overground network around London have their own success stories but they are wholly different operations from Aberystwyth/Pwllheli - Shrewsbury Birmingham; London - Glasgow or Edinburgh - Inverness, for instance. Hendy has spent almost all his working life in transport for the capital in some way or other, with the emphasis seemingly on buses. Given the mess that Arriva (a bus company) made here at the outset of the Wales and Borders Franchise, the future doesn't bode too well. Our chairman feels that the railway has leaned too much toward Tube type operation already, to the detriment of flexibility. We hope Hendy does actually understand the difference in requirements between urban railways in Greater London and nationwide operations in his new role at Network Rail.....



Dovey Junction, 22 Oct 2016.

The 1230 from Aberystwyth is at Platform 2a, while the Pwllheli portion of the down 1009 from Birmingham International runs into Platform 1.

Photograph: Denis Bates

Which way is the wind Blowing-Post Brexit and with the replacement Wales and Border franchise looming what can we expect?

Gareth Marston looks at some trends, looming issues and fears

That N word won't go away

Screaming hysteria about ideology continues to be the response whenever the subject of reforming the railways and suggestion of nationalisation as a cure for the railways many problems is mentioned. Those who want the present system to continue fail to find any positive reasons why it should and attack the perceived ills of nationalised industries from times gone by. In the meantime, the public are highly cynical of the current rail set up, with a clear majority recognising that fares are poor value for money, costs too high and improvements slow and piecemeal. The spat over Jeremy Corbyn and the overcrowded train only highlighted how out of touch those that want the current system to continue are: Branson more concerned about his image than the reality of day to day travel. Whatever their politics, people are fed up with the rail system, yet Government refuses to act for fear of their free market ideology being damaged. Stubborn refusal to admit mistakes is being put above common sense and running the railways in the best possible manner. Barring a sudden general election, we are stuck with the New Labour/Conservatives high cost, high fare, overcrowded small improvement railway for the next few years. I won't go any further into the N word but look at things what will pan out up to 2020.

Cardiff Bay Ball Droppers?

The nightmare scenario we all fear is of course the Welsh Government dropping the ball on the replacement franchise. The prospect of the Welsh Government pig-headedly ploughing ahead with the so called M4 Relief Road and then crying foul that Whitehall hasn't given them enough money to replace EU funds is on the cards. The risk of the plug being pulled or severe scaling back on the South Wales Metro & improvements in the replacement Wales and Border franchise is a real one. I've never been overly filled with confidence that the Welsh Government has got a grasp of transport issues in Wales, or that its officials are up to the job of making the right decisions in a competent manner. Despite having had several years to plan for October 2018, Brexit could be in the eyes of some in Cardiff the perfect excuse to try and get away with neglecting the Welsh rail network once more. The nation lacks any coherent transport policy that works. The South Wales Valleys voted to leave the EU as they couldn't see what the EU was doing for them. Take a look at the poster project of the current round of EU funds – the dualling of the Heads of the Valleys Road. It certainly says something if those that are supposed to benefit from it can't see what it's achieved. Will Welsh Labour ever learn that tarmac doesn't actually promote economic growth?

Discontent in the Marches

There's also the issue of the spat that's reared its head over the franchise boundaries last year, that hasn't gone away. There are many on the English side of the border that don't want Cardiff controlling their rail services and using the profits from the high fares on the Marches line on what they see as funding improvements in Wales at their expense. Ex Rail Minister Claire Perry may have said that through trains will not be stopped at the border but she's an ex Minister now. The Welsh Government issued an Invitation to tender for the whole Wales and Border franchise in June 2016, and the issue of Welsh control over border counties rail services is one that is not going to go away. We all know that having rail services that serve the best interests of their areas is more important than Welsh politicians wanting more powers.... however, watch this space.

Franchise Award Pointers

The issue of the ITT brings us to recent franchise awards. The surprise package was the total fleet replacement in the East Anglian franchise even after Brexit. The general trend sees Whitehall now on Version 3525a of trying to make franchising work. Common themes are ever bigger premium payment profiles or declining subsidy with various degrees of improvement thrown in as a sweetener, with a side order of trying to squeeze staff headcounts. At last there does seem to be something happening about rolling stock shortages, but whether it's enough is another matter. The strapline about the biggest rail investment since Victorian times will be ringing hollow on many lines. Some new stock has been ordered, and Pacers are being culled, but many parts of regions will be relying on ex BR 1980's DMU's well into the mid 2020's. Despite the fanfare some rural lines in the North of England missed out on anything meaningful, with improvements happening between the major towns and cities of the North. Scottish Cities will have cast off West Country HST's, Cardiff to Portsmouth ex-Paddington Commuter DMU's, albeit in larger formations than now. Trans Pennine has gone for new Bi-modes and even loco-hauled stock, Northern Connect services will on the whole have brand new CAF DMU's.

Closer contemporaries of the Cambrian such as the Exeter to Barnstaple line will have cascaded 3 car Class 158 DMU's operating hourly, and on the East Suffolk line which is already hourly, 3 and 4 car new Bi-mode trains from Stadler including 2 through trains to London a day.

Class 158's here to stay as cascades loom

No one is ditching Class 158's (the type of DMU used on our line which are BR built units from the early 1990's) and replacing them. There's some reshuffling, some Northern Connect services in the North East will be operated by them as will services in Devon and Cornwall, and their use in Scotland is still widespread. East Midlands Trains and South West Trains who haven't had their franchises renewed yet employ a large number of them. The good news is that there are currently a hundred plus DMU's that are being cascaded out of franchise replacements that haven't found a home yet. With Wales and Borders at the back of queue it seems reasonable to assume that they will be able to boost their fleet size from cascades by 2020. The exact nature of what will happen is yet to play out, with a number of other franchises all in the queue ahead including South West Trains who may look to replace a large number of Class 158/159's on the Waterloo to Exeter services, which are currently the oldest multiple units running to the capital. However there are lead times on the promised improvements, and it will be 2018/2019 before any cascades caused by new stock start filtering through.

Sources

An anonymous source has told me that pressures on providing premium payments or reducing subsidy are still paramount in DfT thinking, not passengers. However, it is recognised that simply jacking up fares on already overcrowded trains is not an option anymore. With a quality weighting in the specification, expanding the revenue flows with the most potential is the best way to achieve extra income. In the Wales and Border franchise's case this is Cardiff to Manchester, Chester to Manchester and Shrewsbury to Birmingham, where more capacity on existing services is the key. A smart bidder would provide a "goody" on one of these flows and use cascades to improve capacity on the other routes. There is also recognition that moving the North Wales to West Midlands trains via Wrexham and Shrewsbury has stagnated revenue on this flow, and that there is latent demand for services from the Marches to Bristol and Liverpool. North Wales to South Wales is not only thin in terms of revenue, but the trains adversely impact other more profitable flows by suppressing demand, as these trains use up capacity providing services to destinations that passengers don't want. The Welsh Government's aspiration for an hourly Cardiff to Holyhead service is described as a barrier to bidders, unless the Welsh Government would adequately compensate them for lost revenue elsewhere to implement it. Bidders are already not coming forward in numbers due to the cost of bidding for franchises, and the risk of it being in vain, reducing the size of the carrot due to political considerations could further put bidders off.

One scenario that's being looked at is acquiring Stadler Flirt Bi-modes, as ordered for East Anglia, to run an hourly Swansea to Manchester service via Cardiff and the Marches. The new trains would

be the cherry on the franchise-bid cake, offering longer and better trains on the core revenue flow route and offering the novelty of trains exploiting bi-mode capability with under wire running from Swansea to Newport and Crewe to Manchester. A Liverpool to Bristol Temple Meads service via the Marches is also being looked at as a costed bolt on option. The existing Wales and Borders long distance fleet would be cascaded. Of note is the suggestion that the 24 strong current Class 158 fleet will be concentrated on the ex-Central Trains routes and split into 12 three car units and 6 two car ones. The intention is to run all the hourly Wales and Border trains between Shrewsbury and Birmingham International as 5/6 car formations, with a Chester and a Cambrian portion. The service on the Cambrian would be hourly from Shrewsbury to Dovey Junction, with alternate trains heading for Aberystwyth and Pwllheli. A unit would shuttle between Aberystwyth and Dovey Junction/Machynlleth to connect with the Pwllheli trains. This may not go down well with Ceredigion stakeholders, but the intention is to separate out and spread longer distance Cambrian customers with luggage from each other and leave more space on the trains between the West Midlands and Shropshire to grow that market. It might be possible to add a couple of extra trains on the coast at times of peak demand.

This scenario was outlined to me before the announcement was made that the replacement London Midland franchise would restore the second semi fast service between Shrewsbury and Birmingham. Increased competition on this corridor could change plans.

Conclusion

Whilst I'd love to see new trains on this line, it does look a realistic possibility that a full hourly service and extra rolling stock is a possibility given the resources that will be available for the new franchise. Things have at last started to move in the right direction, albeit over a decade and a half late. If the current Wales and Border franchise agreement that appeared in 2003 scored 1 out of 10, the prospect of 6 or 7 out of 10 for the replacement is possible on current trends.

Dovey Junction, 22 Oct 2016.

The 1230 from Aberystwyth is at Platform 2a, while the down 1009 from Birmingham International runs into Platform 2b

Photograph: Denis Bates



Flying Scotsman at Shrewsbury

0103 Flying Scotsman visited Shrewsbury on 8th June as part of a marathon railtour taking in the Cambrian Coast line. Attached are a couple of shots taken by Roger Goodhew showing the locomotive on the Abbey Foregate Viaduct.

The train was from Holyhead that day, having been hauled to Shrewsbury from Paddington the previous Sunday by 45699 "Galatea". The working was then taken over by 2x Class 97s for a run over Cambrian metals to Pwllheli. The tour restarted from Holyhead on Wednesday 8th June, being hauled by LMS Royal Scot Class 7P 4-6-0, No. 46115 as far as Crewe. 60103 "Flying Scotsman" then took over the train, working through to Paddington via Shrewsbury and Newport. Departure from Shrewsbury was some 10 minutes late at 15:13.



The View from Milepost 62, with the Brigadier

Dusty woke me at 0158 the other morning, pulling at my arm. She was pointing out the window to the hillside where there was a fire, and shadowy figures were dancing around it! I got my dressing gown on and found my service revolver- mischief was afoot! The memsahib was worried "remember what happened in Cyprus in 72", she cried. Fresh with the thought of the camp flowerbeds' fate I ventured out. As I approached there was the sound of sobbing and I recognised some of the people from the village and surrounding farms. Mrs Lloyd-Williams was clutching a printout with train times and prices on it: "is there no end to this torment?" she wailed sitting in a heap next to a laptop. Dusty stopped growling as we realised the people were in some distress. Eventually the story came out - a number of the village teenagers had open days at various universities up and down the country, and their parents, not being regular rail travellers, had tried to use the internet, believing it to be the best way to find out about rail fares! However, they were completely flummoxed by the many websites and the complexity and cost of the tickets they offered. In desperation they had started a white witch's coven in the hope it would find the answer for them on the best deals! Dusty rolled her eyes and muttered "should have gone to Newtown Station Travel".

Everyone crowded into our large kitchen and the memsahib was soon producing large volumes of hot chocolate. It seems the general population have been hoodwinked into thinking things are always cheaper and easier on the internet - which is not the case. The villagers knew little about Advance Purchase, Railcards, peak times, split tickets or TOC specific super-duper off peaky weaky, check the alignment of the Moon and Venus for validity tickets and the like. They were bewildered by the complexity and the random nature of how fares to different places varied in cost, and were totally baffled as to why singles were nearly as expensive as returns. I explained that Advance Purchase fares work on a quota and tier system and are available for purchase 12 weeks in advance and can sell out. "So you're not guaranteed a cheaper fare even if you buy in advance?" Dusty shook her head. Another misconception was that you had to specify which train you travelled on. And who can blame them for being confused? The fare system appears to have been designed by a paranoid schizophrenic who was having a bad day. "Who can be bothered with all this nonsense" was one of the parent's comments, "it's easier by car". Anyway I took details and sorted it all out for them the next day.

But what can be done? Whitehall and the TOC's want us to be confused and pay over the odds to fund their failed agendas. Whitehall believed they had designed a model whereby the railways would turn into tax contributors for them with the 1993 Railways Act; we still see this desperation in franchise deals promising huge premium payments to this day, and the TOC's want their shareholders' cut despite providing no added value. Government has pursued an agenda of screwing more money out of the passenger instead of sorting out the soaring costs post privatisation and the complexity of the fare system, closing booking offices, Ticket Machines that don't sell the full range of fares and confusing websites are all part of this agenda. A simpler, fairer and cheaper fare system would actually boost usage and revenue, but of course Government would have to admit its mistakes rather than perpetuating them.

Up until 1963 everyone paid the same rate per mile travelled regardless of where they were in the UK. The 1963 Transport Act instructed British Railways to maximise revenue and so regional managers pursued different policies on setting fares to see what the market would bear in their own areas. Add in decades of organisational and boundary changes and then privatisation, regulated and non-regulated fares and you have today's mess. The fares system is yet another toxic legacy of Marples and Beeching. Need I say more on how discredited it is?

Yes, I can! Here's mine and Dusty's list of the Top 5 most aggravating, discriminatory and unfair fare practices.

Advance Purchase Fares

What about those great deals were told about? Just because 2 people got them it doesn't mean the other 98 people on the train are happy! Generally, you can only get them if you book weeks ahead, and how many of us can do that? We're forced into paying the ever higher full fares, regrettably many of our journeys for a number of years now have been to funerals of friends and old colleagues who don't pre book their funeral dates so the mourners can get cheap fares! It's a form of age discrimination.

The general population don't understand how Advance Purchase works and look utterly bewildered when they try and buy tickets a week beforehand, believing it will be cheaper only to find the only fares left are the full ones! It's not as though the railway sells seats – a spotty Herbert who's internet savvy can have a guaranteed seat for £10 which he buys on his phone app 10 weeks beforehand, even though the girlfriend he was going to see has now left him and he doesn't know what he's going to do when he gets there when folk paying £100 are forced to stand – there's no rhyme or reason to it and it's totally unfair. Watch out for two advanced purchase singles adding up to more than full return fare! And don't mention the amount of time wasting and the faffing these tickets cause - the queues in booking offices are because of people trying to get Advance Purchase tickets! "Which one's the cheapest train tomorrow?" – on a line with 4 trains an hour!

The shrinking Off Peak

There is logic in saying that weekday arrivals into London and our other big cities between 0730 & 0930 and returning from them between 1600 & 1900 are the peak, and there should be some form of restriction as demand is high due to commuters. However, pretending that getting on a train in a rural area at 0925 that doesn't reach the big city till 1130 or travelling counter flow into a city at 1730 needs restricting as "peak" is nothing but cynical price extortion.

Bank Loan Anytime Fares

It's so expensive to travel in the peak that few people do, leading to long distance trains with plenty of seats on them and then the off peak trains are overcrowded! This is totally bonkers and deters people from travelling by rail and exacerbates overcrowding problems.

Walk On Single Fares

Just what is the point of pricing a single 10p cheaper than a return? Many people's travel patterns are decidedly different to those of yesteryear, and having a single fare walk on option that is not advance is a product with a huge market that the railway is losing out on with its ridiculous pricing.

Being penalised for not travelling on our line or to London.

Go in a straight line between the Cambrian and Birmingham International or onto London then fares on our line are on the whole reasonably priced. However, try changing at Shrewsbury and some destinations such as Manchester and Liverpool are grossly overpriced and you pay nearly 10p per mile more. Fill your tank up with petrol or diesel – it's the same price per mile wherever you decide to travel. People are priced off even travelling by the high prices and poor connections at Shrewsbury - it's hardly revenue maximising!

My small cat Dusty says simplifying the fare system is easy. The first step is to have walk on singles half the price of the return fare! Secondly let's have a fair peak time policy applied to where it's actually needed - into our big cities on weekday mornings in the rush hour and out of them on weekday evenings! London and around 14 other large destinations is all that should be included and let's not have a pricing cliff that produces distortions. Add some adjustment to make day returns slightly cheaper than period ones and all you should have for big city destinations is:

Off Peak Single = 1.0

Anytime Single = 1.5

Off Peak Day Return = 1.66

Off Peak Return (valid one calendar month) = 2.0

Anytime Day Return = 2.66

Anytime Return (valid one calendar month) = 3.0

So if the Off Peak Return fare to my destination is £20.00, then the Off Peak Single is £10.00, Anytime Single is £15.00, Off Peak Day Return is £16.60, Anytime Day Return is £26.60 and Anytime Return £30.00.

You'll note someone travelling in the peak but returning in the off peak can buy an Anytime Single and an Off Peak Single for £25.00 which is much fairer than be charged the full Anytime Day Return or Anytime Return.

The rest of the country will have a much simpler:

Anytime Single = 1.0

Anytime Day Return = 1.66

Anytime Return (valid one calendar month) = 2.0

You can bin the nonsense that is Advance Purchase as you already have singles at sensible prices. The complexity is stripped out the system at a stroke. Everyone will know where they stand and it's fair. Seat reservations should be available only to those that pay for them in advance. However, stripping out the complexity doesn't necessarily address the high levels of fares we pay in this country. I have no problem with paying a fair share and helping toward investment or rewarding innovation and improvement. However in the current system we have to pay for imposed higher costs due to incompetence, innovation and improvements are often conspicuous by their absence (see Wales and Border franchise ad nausea since 2003).

Can we go back to pre-1963 where everyone in the country paid the same rate per mile? Unfortunately, we are now a divided nation with huge spatial variation in earnings, this regional income divide in part drove the Brexit vote as there were so many people outside London who don't have the same incomes who felt they had nothing to lose by leaving the EU. But we can have a regional system where the rate per mile is determined by the regional GVA - Gross Value Added figures. Poorer parts like Wales would still pay less than the South East. I also have no objection to a quality points system on a line's service being a variable in determining fares, where factors such as such service frequency, age and quality of rolling stock, punctuality, connection times, overcrowding, cleanliness, facilities for passengers can all be weighted. This will help with recently modified electrified routes with new rolling stock having higher fares to help pay for the investment, but is also fair in that rural routes with old rolling stock and poorer frequencies don't pay as much. If we have genuine long distance Class 1 InterCity services with higher quality facilities then again I have no objection to the fare being slightly higher on them if there's a Class 2 alternative.

Dusty says I'm always fair and I'm sure you'd agree! No doubt the Rail Delivery Group and Cyril the Civil Servant are trying to cook up a "simplification" that's not, in order to try and raise fare income. However enough is enough, and fairness must return to our fare system.

Three Cocks Cottage August 2016

Mansel Williams

Mansel Williams sadly passed away on July 12th. He had been unwell for some while.

Mansel was one of our most ardent supporters, always ready with helpful advice and information. His dedicated work as Chair of the Shrewsbury Aberystwyth Line Liaison Committee was instrumental in bringing improvements to our line and its services.

Mansel represented the Belle Vue Ward on Shrewsbury & Atcham Borough Council from 1990 and then the Belle Vue Division of Shropshire Council when it was formed in 2015.

He was an instinctive Socialist, an active and committed member of the Labour Party and a proud Welshman.

He was instrumental in establishing the English Bridge Workshop for community use and was a founding member of the Shrewsbury Railway Heritage Trust. He was liked and respected by everyone he worked with.

His absence will leave a huge gap. An enormous pair of shoes to fill.

The Dodgital Railway?

Passengers don't seem to be bothered by Network Rail's flagship digital railway project which has been pioneered here on the Cambrian. Network Rail ETCS fitted locomotive 97303 John Tilley barely gets a look from passengers at Newtown on September 23rd as they wait for the 1241 service to Birmingham International. Perhaps other things matter more such as value for money and the ability to get a seat?



Promoted in some quarters as a magic cure to capacity issues on the railway, Network Rail bosses want to fund a UK wide decades-long multi-billion pound replacement of our current signalling systems with this technology. The shiny allure of trains being able to run closer together safely controlled by computer from a handful of locations, therefore providing more seats and services, sounds great until you start thinking about what happens in the real world. In the real world and especially where more pathing capacity is most needed i.e. into/out of London you run out of railway when you reach the London termini. The whole system is constrained by the need to terminate and then turn around, often across the path of incoming trains, having the ability for trains to follow each other more closely is really no use at all due to this, as the system's capacity for train paths is already at saturation point. High Speed Rail and cross-London high volume high frequency suburban lines such as Thameslink and Crossrail will need in cab signalling, but out in the provinces you simply don't have the demand for trains to be tailgating each other: down the Marches for example. The actual usable capacity gain from the digital railway is very small indeed especially when compared to the cost.

In the real world most people would associate increased capacity with something far more simple than a decades away shiny signalling toy of dubious usefulness - they want extra carriages on their trains now, and in the bulk of the country away from some lines into London this is easily achieved just by adding a few more carriages to existing services without any infrastructure enhancement required. Network Rail's Digital Railway is a worrying symptom of the fragmentation of the railway, where the infrastructure provider has been divorced from the railway's real customers for over 20 years, and pursues its own agenda, wanting the bulk of the spending and prestige with it for its own ends. A single vertically integrated railway would not have become so customer-less focussed as Network Rail.

Theresa May's Government is currently wrestling with what money it wants to give the railway in the next control period, and what projects should be authorised. There will be a political need for some

goodies to go round, even if the Treasury wants to cut funding as it always does. Indulging Network Rail's self-serving agenda should not be part of it; the biggest single thing which could be done to help the railway away from London would be to authorise a brand new fleet of proper size trains for Cross Country Trains, allowing a substantial cascade of rolling stock that would increase capacity across all cross country InterCity routes and ex-Regional Railways lines. The cost would be around £500 million. This would boost usage and revenue and help the long term finances of the railway. What hope, or are we stuck with the railway that dodges real issues? The recent pretend improvement franchise extension for Cross Country unfortunately confirms that Government is still pursuing a different agenda than what's best for railway passengers, taxpayers, UK transport and the economy.

Gareth Marston
October 2016

SARPA aspirations for the replacement Wales and Border franchise

1. A franchise that lives in the real world

The basic assumptions about the current franchise let in 2003 were pure fantasy: the hysterical instance of the Strategic Rail Authority that rail use was going to go into decline therefore a "no growth" franchise was appropriate was made up nonsense that bore no relation to the actual growth in usage at the time and since nor the suppressed demand for rail travel that there still is in Wales and the Borders due to the failure of successive Governments transport policy.

The replacement franchise must be first and foremost realistic and flexible to meet the challenges it will face in the real world over the decade from 2018 to 2028. Catering for actual and suppressed growth must be part of that process.

SARPA would like to see the operator weaned off the current levels of Government subsidy by expanding rail usage and therefore revenue in the network. The current operator has been allowed to be lethargic and apathetic, knowing that the fixed high subsidy from the Welsh Government combined with no requirement for investment and revenue increase attained from external factors has been a comfort blanket resulting in the current franchise paying the highest percentage dividend of any TOC. This has resulted in deficiencies and poor practices that are culturally acceptable to the current TOC Management but not users. Interventions from Welsh Government to address some of the deficiencies and the TOC reporting to them has led to a culture of the Welsh Government being referred to as the customer to the detriment of the actual customers who use the train. The new franchise whilst acknowledging the public funding it will get must re focus on the passenger who are after all the people who use it in the real world.

2. A realistic quantity of rolling stock in the franchise

The inherited quantity of rolling stock deemed fit for a no growth franchise in 2003 was inadequate for peak times even then and this key deficiency had been cruelly exposed by growth since. The new franchise desperately needs to **significantly increase** its long distance service fleet.

Our experiences, the current situation and planning for growth to 2028 suggest that the franchise needs to aim to have:

- a minimum of 6 car/coach formations in operation between Shrewsbury and Birmingham International.
- Enough rolling stock to run an hourly service between Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury whilst fitting in with the above requirement. 2 car formations will be inadequate at peak times.

- Monday to Friday Peak Hour additional stock on the Shrewsbury to Birmingham International Corridor should be used for extra capacity on the Cambrian on Saturdays and school holiday times.
- Manchester to Cardiff services need to be 6 car/coach formations in the peaks and no fewer than 4 at other times.

We would suggest as a minimum at the start of the franchise that the entire 24 unit current ERTMS fitted Class 158 fleet is allocated to the ex Regional Railways Central lines in the franchise. I.e. Chester/Birmingham/Aberystwyth/Pwllheli.

3. Trains that go where there is customer demand

- **Through Trains must be maintained to Birmingham from the Cambrian (Aberystwyth and Pwllheli).**

There is overwhelming demand for trains to continue as through services to Birmingham either to New St for the city centre, International for the airport/ NEC or using it as one change of train for London and other UK destinations. A lack of through trains would severely effect usage/revenue.

- **Improved connections at Shrewsbury from/to Cambrian trains towards/from the North West of England i.e Chester/Crewe/Manchester.**

The current poor connections at Shrewsbury to the North West of England are suppressing demand with lengthy wait times of 40 plus minutes or tight connections that are not held for late running even by a minute or two which are off putting.

We have consistently identified the Cambrian to/from North West England flow has having high potential for growth, connections at Shrewsbury have been prioritised toward Cardiff which has remained a thin market despite 10 years of trying to stimulate it.

We are not averse to some Cambrian services that currently terminate at Shrewsbury running through to Crewe as a means to do this.

- **Improved connections at Shrewsbury from/to Cambrian trains towards/from London with services operated by the West Coast Mainline franchise.**

Whilst details on this franchise have yet to be announced we expect an increase in services to/from Shrewsbury. Many Cambrian users are reluctant Birmingham New St interchangers the new station refurbishment was not designed with interchange passengers in mind. Many would prefer to change trains at Shrewsbury onto a London service.

4. Cambrian Mainline Hourly service

After years of campaigning extra services were introduced on the Cambrian Mainline in May 2015, this was resourced without any additional trains and a timetable has been produced utilising existing resources which has led to a hotch-potch timetable that shifts between an hourly and a two hourly service. Early indications of strong growth in the first twelve months have been very welcome and have justified the introduction of the extra trains despite poor publicity and the public being confused as to when trains are running. There have been reports of passengers standing on the 0630 from Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury between Welshpool and Shrewsbury this September (2016), the train was only introduced in May 2015. The biggest complaint we hear is the need for a service from Shrewsbury around 1630.

We feel that this justifies the next step to running an hourly interval service throughout the day between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth. The times of the trains need to be tidied up to be clockface as well with the current departure times varying each hour which is causing confusion.

5. Cambrian Coast Line – fit for purpose

The coast line is in a tourist area bordering on the Snowdonia National Park which peaks at weekends and school holiday times year round yet the timetable/service fails to reflect that fact.

- **Proper Sunday Service all year round.**

The current service is something of a joke with a token “winter service” one train each way running on May Bank Holiday Sundays and Easter. The brief “summer” service of 3 trains each way is also inadequate. The pattern should reflect that on the mainline with services starting after 0900 at their weekday frequency.

- **The need for increased capacity at peak times.**

Already alluded to above the line sees pronounced seasonal peaks but the railway currently supplies the same two hourly interval two car service as in mid winter. Severe overcrowding, passengers not being able to get on trains, late running that impacts all the way to Birmingham and an inability to collect fares is a result. Staff at Machynlleth in desperation hire in road transport in the summer months.

- **Improved timetable and connections.**

The inability of the 1900 Machynlleth to Pwllheli service to stop at all stations north of Barmouth is well documented and needs resolving ASAP if it's still not so at franchise changeover.

A full hourly service on the Cambrian Mainline should improve connectivity between the Cambrian Coast and Aberystwyth allowing people proper access to their nearest regional centre.

6. Shrewsbury station – fit for purpose

Shrewsbury has been the only gateway to the Cambrian line since the mid 1960's, however the station has suffered from neglect and stripping out capacity in years gone by has left poor passenger facilities for today's expanding market. The station needs to function properly and should be a priority as a major hub station. The long waits facing many passengers for connections are exacerbated by the poor condition of station which discourages use further. The isolation of Platform 3 from the rest of the station hampers its use and is particularly awkward for interchange passengers.

Action Needed:

- Repair of the leaking canopy roof
- New toilets
- Improved catering/retail facilities.
- Ticket Barriers that actually work – Shrewsbury's gate line has the highest fail rate on ATW's network.
- An internal footbridge connecting Platform 3 to the island complex.

Confusingly Cambrian departures use Platforms 3,4,5 & 6 on a regular basis. A dedicated platform would be easier for passengers.

7. Welshpool station -fit for purpose

Welshpool is the busiest intermediate station on the line between Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury yet its platform facilities consist of a single bus shelter with one corner occupied by a TVM which is shunned. The station desperately needs better sheltered waiting as a matter of priority.

8. A car parking plan for all stations on the line

There's a paucity of car parking for rail customers at all stations with feedback indicating this is putting customers off traveling by rail. A plan is needed probably in conjunction with local authorities to improve

this. In addition, certain locations such as Newtown suffer from town office workers taking advantage of free car parking and crowding out genuine rail users.

9. Bus/ rail Integration needs to happen

There are 19 closed stations on the Cambrian Mainline between Shrewsbury and Aberystwyth with further communities without rail access along the closed lines from Aberystwyth to Carmarthen, Barmouth Junction to Ruabaon, Afon Wen to Bangor, Moat Lane Junction to Brecon and Buttington Junction to Oswestry. These communities all suffer from a lack of Bus/rail integration combined with the poor parking mentioned above means they are isolated and disconnected from the rail network. Bus services tend to be local authority specified some local authorities are more receptive to working with the railway than others – Powys CC in particular has a mental block on the issue seemingly going out of its way to make sure integration doesn't happen. The new franchisee must work to bring back the lost communities to rail.

10. Fair Fares and Attractive Fares

Whilst on the whole fares on the Cambrian (particularly so with Cambrian Railcard) and from the Cambrian to Birmingham and London are relatively good value for money there are still some anomalies' and other fares within the Wales and Border franchise area are not.

- **Attractive fares for day trippers on Cambrian Coast which are easier for staff to issue too.**

Summer services on the coast can be busy and on-board staff struggle to issue tickets to all customers, many get a free ride- a simplified zonal flat price ticket for day trips between Aberystwyth-Machynlleth & Pwllheli would help issue tickets and be attractive for the tourist trade.

- **Peak pricing based on departure time in rural areas must be abolished.**

We can understand peak pricing based on arrival times/departure times into large cities served by the franchise as there is enormous pressure on services around them at those times however the current practice of declaring departure time in rural Mid Wales before 0930 as "peak" is grossly unfair. It's impossible to arrive into Manchester before 1215 or Cardiff before 1211 on weekday Off Peak Day Returns long after any peak hour commuter would want to. The distances involved are too great. Also included in this mess is the anomaly that is Telford - the only destination between Birmingham International and Aberystwyth/Pwllheli that has an Off Peak Day Return fare available to it. It confuses the passengers no end and evening peak returns from the West Midlands usually have space on them coming from Telford due to the fact that passengers disembark at Telford en masse.

- **Fair Fares to destinations off line in the franchise.**

Fares to places like Manchester, Liverpool and Cardiff represent poor value for money in comparison with travel to London. Advance Purchase fares are not as numerous nor as cheap and the off peak returns can be 50% more expensive per mile than to London – as well as being penalised financially any traveller who changes at Shrewsbury faces poor facilities, poor connections and smaller trains as well.

SARPA Meetings 2016-17

December	Saturday 10th	11.45	Royal Naval Club, Market Street, Aberystwyth.
January	Saturday 4th	14.00	Royal Oak, Welshpool
February	Tuesday 7th	18.30	Unicorn Hotel, Caersws
March	Saturday 11th	14.30	Rly Station, Shrewsbury
April	Tuesday 4th	18.55	Sportsman, Newtown