

The Rages Rag

Newsletter of Rail Action Group, East of Scotland

www.rages.org.uk

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North Berwick Service News

From June 2nd, the full service on the North Berwick line was restored with Haymarket being served once more and capacity difficulties eased by the introduction of an extra early morning train at 0809 from Prestonpans to Edinburgh on Monday to Friday.

Most services are now worked by electric trains and with the Class 322 silver or dark blue units due for some refurbishment work in the autumn now is the time to look at whether the opportunity could be taken to modify the interiors to be more appropriate for the North Berwick route.

The Class 322 trains were used on Stansted Airport services and thus have very generous luggage accommodation. They also have more spacious seating in what was a First Class area and even a telephone. This takes up potential seating areas and it is therefore suggested that RAGES members may like to contact the editor with a view on what any refurbishment should contain.

A few thoughts would be:

- should the tables be removed to give more seating?
- should some of the luggage racks be replaced by special bicycle places or extra seats?
- is there a need for an on-board telephone?
- should a different type of seat be fitted?
- bearing in mind the short distance many travellers are on the train, should special standing areas be introduced away from the doors?
- or in fact are we happy with the general layout and recovering the seats and generally tidying up the appearance be all that is sought?

Whilst the ultimate decision does of course rest with ScotRail, input

from users is always welcome, so if you could pass over any thoughts to the Editor (RAGES@btinternet.com or mail to the "Published by" address at the foot of page 4) then that would be appreciated.

Coming soon

Of interest to readers in the Berwick area will be the new winter Virgin timetable that it is hoped can



be introduced on September 29th 2002. Apparently there will be a larger number of services using this station than at present. This will offer a wider choice of direct services to destinations throughout Central and Southern England, as well as enhancing the number of trains to Edinburgh.

As soon as we receive further information, we will let you know.

[Ed: I have shrunk the photograph to limit the size of the file for your downloading!]

A Comparison – Britain and Switzerland by Tom Thorburn

My wife and I took a rail-based holiday in Switzerland in mid-June. My expectations of this country's public transport system were high from the reliable sources I had heard from. This article is intended to let the public, the politicians and the rail industry of Britain know of the ocean of difference between the two country's systems.

A "Swiss Card", provided as part of the holiday package, entitles the holder to free travel on the days of arrival and departure and on the days that they move between holiday destination(s). It also allows half price travel on any other day including buses and ferries. At Zurich Station ticket office, we were greeted politely in a Swiss German tongue. Slightly embarrassed I replied in English - "Could you please validate our Swiss Cards?" To be then addressed in better English than I am used to back home really did make me feel humble. On descending escalator to platform level, I viewed the station somewhat in awe. Had there been a Royal visit in the past few hours to explain why everything gleamed as much as the rails? In fact, all the Swiss stations were in a similar state.

We then boarded our state-owned electric-hauled double-deck train which was to take us to Thun. What can be said of this journey: our tickets were checked within two to three minutes of boarding; the train was immaculate; the quality of ride was outstanding; each station was announced in three languages including English; there was no rubbish to be seen on either side of the fence; and finally the investment in around 30 miles of new line between Rothrist and Amstetten.

Our mountain rack railway trips were also very clean, comfortable and efficient and we got

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The editor invites contributions which should be sent to him at the "Published by" address at the foot of page 4.

New RAGES Committee Member for East Linton

The Committee have recently welcomed Allison Cosgrove representing East Linton Community Council.

Allison says "The growth of East Linton in recent years has led to calls for the station to be re-opened to take commuter traffic off the A1, and to provide a more local service to Dunbar for East Lothian's increasing population. The greater passenger use on the North Berwick line has proved that people do want to travel by train if there is a suitable service, and I am pleased to be part of an effective campaigning organisation which has already done so much to highlight rail use. In addition, I would like to highlight those issues which are of particular concern to women, such as safety at unmanned stations and adequate car parking."

Dunbar News – Tom Thorburn

Some two to three weeks prior to the introduction of the new summer timetable, I observed that the Monday to Friday 23.00 ex-Edinburgh service, which also serves Berwick, was missing. I immediately made enquiries with GNER to see if this was a publishing error, but sadly this was not the case. Letters have been written to GNER Chief Executive Christopher Garnett; John Home Robertson MSP and Councillor David Costello to appeal against the withdrawal. Barrie Forrest has also been in touch with Councillor David Jones and Alan Beith MP to enlist their support.

Christopher Garnett has replied to John Home Robertson MSP and RAGES, emphasising that passenger figures were not healthy. Barrie has had a copy of the reply via Alan Beith from Jonathan Metcalfe, Chief Operating Manager, GNER. Jonathan also makes the point about poor passenger numbers, but more importantly (in his opinion) talks of the renewal of signalling equipment within Waverley being a major factor in the withdrawal. We have subsequently made enquiries and this renewal work would not affect services at this time of night. RAGES's members and the general public have been in touch to register their disappointment at the withdrawal of the 23.00 service.

Christopher Garnett has been written to again, pointing out some of the very important points with regard to the 23.00 service, i.e. poor patronage is due to a combination of the following:

- withdrawal following the Hatfield accident due to stock shortage in October 2000
- withdrawal again following the Great Heck incident due to stock shortage in March 2001
- lack of a northbound train stopping in Dunbar around 18.00 to 18.30 to enable people the required flexibility to get into Edinburgh.

It has to be said that GNER did not publicise the fact that the 23.00 had been reinstated after its withdrawal – this was left entirely up to the limited resources of 'RAGES'.

The 23.00 service has had a very on/off history where the customer was unaware of its existence or reinstatement. Finally an appeal was made to reinstate the 23.00 ex-Edinburgh (and a northbound train – as above) at least for the duration of the summer timetable as it is well used with Edinburgh Festival attendees. Marketing can then be undertaken at the stations served by 23.00 and the local press. The committee eagerly awaits a reply to this letter.

Lack of Seating

No doubt my experience will be the result of a fairly typical snapshot of everyday practice within our rail industry.

In order to be at the first day of opening of the extension to the Strathspey Railway, I phoned to book three seats on the 08.40 Edinburgh to Inverness service some eight days in advance. I was informed that I could only have two seats. On saying that I would stand if need be I duly received my three tickets. On the day of the journey, June 1st, we had the good fortune to have two brothers sit opposite. During conversation, we discovered that they had an identical tale of having been told that there were no seats available.

The question I would like ScotRail to answer is: why does the booking system not trigger an instruction to add additional units to these fully-booked services? This would result in more revenue for the operator and more comfort for the passenger. There are plenty of spare units as we saw when passing Haymarket Depot. The depot was well-filled and I cannot believe that they were all under maintenance or servicing.

Gullane Area Community Council - R J Darling

John Fortune, a member of RAGES and Gullane Area Community Council, invited us to a recent meeting to present our aims to the Council. We were also to answer questions which the Council had in relation to the East Lothian Transport Policy.

On the night there was a good attendance of the public as well as Council members. With the aid of our overhead projector, Tom Thorburn, our chairman, described our history, aims and achievements to date, the latter concentrating on the North Berwick service. Question time followed and the meeting was particularly interested in the proposed Scott Wilson move of Drem Station, congestion on the main line and the recent suggestion that a new station might be placed on the branch line near Kingston to serve a future housing development.

Reston News – Barrie Forrest

Euan Robson MSP attended our June committee meeting.

He has received a communication from Scottish Borders Council that they could support the safeguarding of a station site with a view to the subsequent re-opening, given sufficient passenger demand. Mr Robson is also writing to Railtrack and the SRA regarding Reston Station.

A petition has been organised by Mr Robson for the re-opening of Reston, which will be presented to Parliament in the autumn. Petition papers are in local shops in the Reston catchment area.

On May 10th, Tom Thorburn and I met Christine Grahame MSP in Edinburgh. She is very supportive of the railway network in Scotland. We gave her an update on RAGES's aims and our progress to date.

As a result Ms Grahame spoke in a debate on the structure of the Railway Network in Scotland at the Scottish Parliament and raised the issue of the re-opening of Reston Station. She also asked Lewis Macdonald, Deputy Minister for Transport, for a cost of a feasibility study.

Ms Graham has also lodged a Parliamentary Question asking the Scottish Executive whether it will provide the funding for such a study.

Four committee members met a representative of Railtrack at Reston Station on May 25th. We enquired about passing loops and a suitable station site. Railtrack are very keen to restore loops on the East Coast Main Line and Reston was one site being considered. Railtrack's representative saw no problems installing loops at Reston and confirmed that station platforms could be located on these loops.

This will not happen overnight, but if we all contact our MPs and MSPs, we might get a green signal sooner than later.

Swiss - Britain Comparison

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there by a new bendy bus and metre gauge regional BOB (Bernese Oberland Bahn) train – all at half price!

Our next destination was Zermatt. Again we boarded a state-owned electric-hauled double-deck train at Thun and transferred at Brig to the regional metre gauge BVZ (Brig Visp Zermatt Bahn). Whilst waiting for our train in Thun, I saw four freights pass through – two carrying articulated lorries, one freightliner and one mixed. Investment in their network has to be seen to be appreciated. At Zermatt we took the mountain rack railway to Gornergrat. Here all the stations had electronic turnstiles.

Davos Platz was the last destination. The eight hour trip from Zermatt was on the metre gauge 'Glacier Express' in a panorama coach, which gave excellent viewing of this country's wonders. Lunch aboard this train was excellent. The only criticism of this trip was the screeching of wheels on the tight curves. Incidentally, this was not evident in either first or second class coaches on the same section.

On our way home, I was keen to know from which platform we would depart to the Airport. At the information desk, I was politely given a card which showed the departure platform for every train calling at the airport, but was also told to check the board. The journey back to the airport was in a diesel ICE set where the comfort can only be described as sumptuous.

Conclusions

- all trains were clean and tidy
- the 'Swiss Card' is an excellent scheme to get about the country by an integrated public transport system
- trains and all forms of public transport were punctual – running with the precision of a Swiss watch
- the track was maintained to a high level – metre gauge track trains with standard gauge bodies further showed this to be the case
- massive investment levels in new lines and routes were very evident and a large extension to Zurich Station was underway. Conversely, Britain currently spends a meagre 0.3% of its GDP on railways
- freight is very evident on rail
- vehicles carried on trains through the mountain tunnels where no road exists: for the 10 mile Lotschberg Tunnel – 25 Swiss Francs (£10) for car and occupants
- information was readily available in several languages at stations and aboard trains
- linesides were all clean and tidy from a public and business point of view
- by comparison, our system is third world (quote by Swiss Bank divisional manager who has to use Britain's railways from time to time).

Recommendations

- Messrs Blair, Brown and Darling (*Ed: Not the Ed!*) and their associates should visit Switzerland to see how a properly integrated and supported public transport system works. This visit should be at least four days to include travelling the network and in depth discussions with their counterparts on investments and financial support
- a delegation from Railtrack and their contractors should visit Switzerland to see how they maintain their network to a high standard where their weather conditions are more extreme than ours, as is the topography of the country
- representatives from Association of Train Operating Companies should also visit Switzerland to see how they can improve the poor old travellers' lot in this country.

(Ed: I can agree with all Tom's observations, as I was there at the same time. Our only problem was a signal failure resulting in a 10 minute delay which was apologised for very promptly.)

Letters to the Editor

Dear Sir,

I am afraid that the service offered to Berwick passengers has over the past year fallen well short of what it should be. Between 24 July and 8 September last year I kept a diary of my rail travels, commuting to and from Edinburgh. Of 47 journeys made over this period on GNER, a total lateness of 709 minutes was recorded, giving an average of just over 15 minutes. 18 trains were late by more than 10 minutes, some very significantly, while 15 were late by up to 10 minutes and 14 were on time, or very nearly so. The 14 journeys on ScotRail gave a total lateness of 36 minutes, almost all of which was caused by cancellation of one train, leading to a 30 minute delay. Otherwise lateness was insignificant. For the GNER journeys, the weather was fine, there was only 10 minutes delay due to a vandalised window and I have not included the journey when a passenger was taken ill. Of course, GNER will say that arrivals up to 10 minutes late count as on time, but for a 45 minute journey, this can represent a lateness of 25% and saying that this counts as "on time" is not acceptable to local passengers.

Generally we at Berwick suffer much more from significant lateness northbound. Southbound trains are seldom late by more than 5 minutes.

I noted other problems, such as frequent failure of air conditioning and severe overcrowding, with doorways blocked by luggage during peak holiday times. Of course we are about to lose the very useful 23.00 departure southbound.

We have super staff at Berwick station and on-board staff are generally of a high standard of efficiency and courtesy. However, I cannot say the same for staff at Waverley. I, and several others, have been far too often shuttled between GNER and Railtrack when things have gone badly wrong. GNER staff seem to think that "We've told Railtrack" is a sufficient answer to everything.

My conclusion is that local passengers will never really get a proper service from GNER. By no means are all of the delays down to it, but when trains are coming from a starting point 330 miles away, there is far too much potential for things to go wrong. By contrast ScotRail local services over to Fife seem generally to be on time. I am therefore very glad to see that RAGES has been fairly active in promoting the idea of a local service to Berwick. However, you are still not expecting any kind of service after 19.22 on Saturday! Surely this is the night when more passengers may want to go to Edinburgh for a night out. Last departure times on Saturday for other ScotRail services are generally around 23.00. Why do we in the south-east not deserve the same chance? Otherwise the proposed timetable is good and let's hope we can see it implemented.

The matter is increasingly important with the imminent renewal of the ScotRail franchise. I think we must press for ScotRail's remit to be extended to include Drem - Berwick. If this chance is missed, there will not be another for years and the inter-city companies will be able to dictate the level of service to suit themselves rather than local people.

Please let me know if I can do anything to further matters in this area.

Yours etc,

Brian Patton
Foullden Bastle
Berwickshire

Dear Sir,

WHO CARES? VIRGIN DOES!

My wife and I, both Senior citizens, wanted to visit our daughter who lives in Scotland. The problem was the journey, it's too far to drive. We considered other methods of transport, like flying, but decided against it.

Then we considered travelling by train but thought the cost would be prohibitive. There were other worries as well; we're on our own, can't walk far, and what about the luggage and the platform changes? There was also the nagging thought of the recent rail accidents. The desire to go to Scotland diminished as we considered the problems of the journey. Perhaps we would leave it.

Then, my daughter told us to ring rail enquires and tell them how we feel. So we did, and from that moment on we began to look forward to the journey. We were given an advanced booking Virgin rail ticket, Bristol to Edinburgh Waverly, £30 return, each. Then we were asked to arrive twenty minutes before departure where Virgin staff would be waiting to escort us to the train.

Sure enough, we arrived at Bristol station at the agreed time and were met by two charming and very polite Virgin rail staff in their brightly coloured red jackets, making them very distinguishable and easy to see. They were then joined by three others. The five staff took our luggage and helped me into the wheel chair they had provided and we were taken to the train, the luggage was taken care of and we were personally escorted to our seats.

We had a very pleasant and surprisingly quick journey, in a clean train that was not overcrowded. We had an excellent table seat with room to stretch out.

When the train reached Edinburgh, three Virgin staff were waiting with a wheelchair and to assist with luggage. I was wheeled to my son-in-law's car and wished a happy holiday by the staff.

I am no longer worried about the journey home, we're not on our own.

Who cares? Virgin does.

Frank Blackmore

E-mail - c/o_dawnroche@lineone.net

Membership

We now have around 170 members from around the counties.

Please encourage your neighbours or fellow passengers to join RAGES.

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

Annual General Meeting

Our third annual general meeting will be held on 14th August 2002 at 19:30hrs in the West Barns Bowling Club, West Barns, Dunbar. All members are invited.