

The Rages Rag

Newsletter of Rail Action Group, East of Scotland

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Minister Comes to East Lothian and Berwickshire

On Tuesday 5 August, Stewart Stevenson, MSP and Minister for Transport, visited East Lothian and Berwickshire as he had promised when RAGES met him at Holyrood on March 13.

East Linton



Allison Cosgrove, Stewart Stevenson, Paul McLennan, Iain Gray, Norman Hampshire and Tom Thorburn. Photo: RAGES

The Minister's first call was at East Linton to see the site of the proposed station, as detailed in The Rages Rag Issue 38. He was accompanied by a Transport Scotland representative.

Allison Cosgrove, RAGES Secretary and East Linton Representative, showed the party round the site. Also on the visit were Iain Gray, MSP for East Lothian, local councillors and officials, and a representative from SEStran.



Paul McLennan, Iain Gray, Stewart Stevenson and Tom Thorburn. Photo: RAGES

Dunbar

The party then proceeded to Dunbar to see the station and to have an official photocall. Fortunately a train was due and we awaited its arrival.

A productive discussion took place at the nearby Barns Ness Hotel for a discussion.

Mr Stevenson declared himself to be a "train enthusiast" as a means of public transport. He re-stated the forthcoming consultations, which were outlined in our Rages Rag Insert for issue 38, and noted that RAGES as a stakeholder would be invited to comment on these.

Various people round the table noted that:

- There was no direct public transport for students from Dunbar and its surroundings to the newly-opened Queen Margaret University with its adjacent station at Musselburgh.
- There is much housing development taking place over the next few years.
- Whilst some train services only benefit from commuter traffic, East Lothian, and Dunbar in particular, is different with its tourist attraction for visitors to Edinburgh.
- East Lothian was also supportive of the extension of a local service to Reston and Berwick.

The possible introduction of a First ScotRail service to Dunbar was seen as a means of proving that this could sit comfortably with the main line trains to the south. It would also be easier to justify an increment growth of the service to include a re-opened station at East Linton and extending the service to Berwick.

Iain Gray thanked the Minister for his time in East Lothian before some of the party headed east for Reston.

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Welcome to this issue of The Rages Rag, which we publish regularly. It is the main means of communication with our members.

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Minister Comes to East Lothian and Berwickshire

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Reston



John Lamont, Stewart Stevenson, Tom Thorburn, Barrie Forrest and Brian Patton. Photo: RAGES

At Reston we were met by John Lamont, MSP for Berwickshire and Roxburgh, Scottish Borders councillors and officials and a community councillor. The East Lothian contingent did not travel to Reston, but the SEStran representative did.

We visited the preferred station site via the farm track under the railway line at the top of Orchard Road with the guidance of Barrie Forrest, RAGES Vice Chairman and Reston Representative, and Tom Thorburn, RAGES Chairman.

Again there was a train due and the news reporter was able to obtain a photograph of key people with a train in the background. Not seen above, but also present at all sites, was your editor and photographer for the day - Russell Darling.

The group adjourned to the Anchor Inn at Coldingham for another discussion. Much was talked about, but the main thrust of the argument for a station at Reston was:

- The long journey time for the bus to Edinburgh
- The younger generation was unable to stay in eastern Berwickshire due to the difficulty in commuting to university, college or a job
- Whilst being a rural community, the Scottish Borders has the least income rate in Scotland which can often preclude car purchase
- Even with a car, fuel costs had been rising dramatically in recent months and would be unlikely to fall much
- Whilst the station would be at Reston, there is a wide circle of towns and villages within a short distance
- The local farmer was willing to sell as much land as was necessary for car parking etc.

Tom Thorburn thanked the Minister for his time spent in East Lothian and Berwickshire.

After the meeting Tom said: "A major event in the history of the RAGES took place on Tuesday 5th August. The visit by Stewart Stevenson MSP Transport Minister went very well. The sun shone which allowed the Minister, our constituent MSPs, councillors, council/SEStran officials and the RAGES Committee to get round all three sites in comfort.

"The Minister showed great interest in what we wish to achieve in our quest to have a local service to Dunbar and Berwick and have East Linton and Reston stations re-opened. Coming from the most rural part of Scotland, Stewart fully appreciated our needs for better transport links.

"It was also very pleasing for the Group to learn that we, along with our Councils, are to be invited to put together separate submissions to a consultation being undertaken. This consultation will be of major importance in our quest for the services which our area deserves.

"To round up on this important day, I would like to thank the Minister for coming to see and listen to us. Let us hope that it will not be too long before he visits us again to re-open East Linton and Reston."

Ninth RAGES Annual General Meeting

Our ninth AGM was held in the Community Hall in East Linton on 11 September 2008, when 10 members attended, with 24 apologies. Chairman, Tom Thorburn, welcomed everyone.

The minutes of the eighth annual general meeting were approved.

Review of the Group's ninth year

Tom praised GNER for their efforts prior to the franchise handover. It was felt that they had been responsive and worked well with RAGES.

However, there has been concerns expressed by RAGES at the level service offered by National Express. Issues included level of car parking charges, level of service and staffing at various stations.

Concern was raised at the lack of seating on particular CrossCountry services, in particular the 17:05 hrs service which has an inadequate number of coaches for the patronage on board. RAGES have written to the company on this subject.

Concern was also raised regarding the issue of concessionary passes and ticketing machines with First ScotRail trains. East Lothian Travel Passes are now accepted on train.

Tom complemented Paul McLennan and David Berry of

East Lothian Council for the series of cross-party meetings held by the Council.

Much of the Scottish Borders Council's efforts this year have been towards the Waverley Line. However support has been forthcoming from Council Leader David Parker for Reston.

There was discussion regarding the Minister's visit to East Linton, Dunbar and Reston. There was general feeling that the visit was very worthwhile. A consultation will be held with stakeholders regarding the recent announcement by the Scottish Government in regard to the franchise extension.

Transport Scotland are looking at two options:

Option 1 - First ScotRail services at 06:30, 21.30 daily and 22:50 on Friday. RAGES has expressed the opinion that the 21:30 service could better be re-timed to 22:30/23:00 as a late evening service six days a week.

Option 2 - Full hourly rail service from Dunbar to Edinburgh, with RAGES preferring stops at Dunbar, Drem, Wallyford and Musselburgh.

Transport Scotland have confirmed that they will undertake and fully fund a STAG appraisal.

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Rail Replacement Bus Services to Berwick and Dunbar

It is that time of year again – the train-less week-ends are back.

When last year passengers had to endure replacement bus services on many week-ends, it was clear that the journey times allowed were much too generous, of the order of 110 minutes between Berwick and Edinburgh with a Dunbar stop, using powerful coaches. To put this into perspective, it should be mentioned that Perryman's 253 service, which is operated with small buses and calls at virtually every hamlet en route, does the journey in 125 minutes. RAGES took up the matter with the train operating companies and we were assured that, on future occasions when it was necessary to run replacement services, a much more realistic journey time would be offered.

Now the replacement services are back and, disappointingly, the journey times are exactly the same as they were last year. On Sunday 5 October, passengers on the 19:20 hrs departure from Edinburgh had to sit at Dunbar for 18 minutes while the coach waited for the timetable to catch up with it, and it still arrived at Berwick 15 minutes early. Alnmouth passengers then had a similar wait at Berwick. The slow speed did allow the coach driver to make two telephone calls, of what seemed to be a social nature, between 19.30 and 19.40 and again between Burnmouth and Berwick. As he did not use a hand 'phone, this was probably legal, but still it did not inspire confidence.

One would have thought that, when planning a replacement service, departure times from the end stations would, logically, have been fixed around those of the trains which are being replaced, with later running throughout, and that staff should exercise a bit of flexibility to cope with passengers' wishes. Not so, the coach times bear no relation at all to train times and

staff seem to have no wish to be flexible at all. It was particularly annoying that the Arriva CrossCountry manager on duty at Waverley on 5 October flatly refused to allow Berwick passengers to travel on the 17:50 hrs departure to Dunbar and Alnmouth, condescendingly explaining that there was a timetable to be adhered to and that the coach could not possibly divert to Berwick or even set down passengers at the start of the by-pass. No doubt it then went on to wait for 18 minutes at Dunbar. On being questioned, he could not even tell us the time of the next Berwick departure. His colleague then chipped in to say that, as the normal 18:00 train did not call at Berwick anyway, we had no grounds to expect a service at that time. It does of course call at Berwick at 18:41 and he clearly is not as familiar with the timetable on the line as he should be. We then had to wait for a further 90 minutes. The whole impression was that of a complete shambles and Berwick passengers deserve a better deal than this. It has to be said that the National Express staff were rather more helpful when they came on duty.

I write this having just had experience of travelling on Eurostar to and from Paris some days after the Channel Tunnel fire. At both St Pancras and the Gare du Nord, staff could not have been more helpful, cheerful and flexible. Yet they were operating an emergency timetable, hastily contrived after the fire. Here it seems that the two train operating companies on which Berwick has to rely cannot even put together a reasonable replacement timetable when a little bit of planned, routine maintenance has to be undertaken.

Brian Patton, Berwick Area representative for RAGES.

Ninth Annual General Meeting

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Chairman's Report

Tom thanked Roy Mitchell for his contribution to the group over a number of years and he also thanked the committee in what has been a very busy year.

Membership Report

Our membership currently stands at 152 which is 3 more than at the last AGM. 88% of last year's members had renewed their subscriptions which is better than this time last year.

RAGES now has six community councils as members: Haddington and District; Cockenzie and Port Seton; North Berwick; West Barns and District; Duppender; and Reston and Auchencrow.

As usual we published four Rags during the last year and the editor thanked the committee who take it in turns to

distribute them.

The web site is now being updated more regularly.

Treasurer's Report

The annual accounts to 31 March 2008 were received and approved. These showed a surplus for the year compared with a deficit for last year, partly due to the increase in subscriptions. Funds stood at £274.89.

Election of Office Bearers

The holders of all posts were re-elected for a further year.

Guest Speaker

Unfortunately due to a diary mix-up, our intended speaker was unable to be present.

North Berwick Line to Benefit from £3m Track Renewals Project

Network Rail is investing £3m on renewing track on the line between Edinburgh and North Berwick.

The vital maintenance programme, which will help deliver a continued regular and reliable service for passengers, was carried out during October weekends.

The work required bus replacement services while engineers renewed life-expired track and installed new switches and crossings.

Prior to this work, David Simpson, Network Rail route director Scotland, said: "These works are essential for maintaining the railway and will allow for the continued operation of reliable passenger services on this busy route in the future."

Berwick News

As far as the running of trains has been concerned, there is not a great deal to record. There were naturally some delays due to the flooding which occurred and on Tuesday 26 August when the 09:28 hrs departure was delayed for almost 90 minutes, with consequent late running of the following trains. On the whole, however, performance has been very good.

There have been no further developments about the question of Berwick station becoming involved in any kind of community partnership scheme and this is probably just as well.

A new member of staff has now been recruited for the booking office, but as yet she has not taken up service and the present staff are still coping (very well) to cover the vacancy. Nonetheless, queues do develop, for example when the one member of staff on duty is serving a very deaf elderly person or a visitor from abroad who is not a native English speaker.

It is disappointing to note that all mention of the number 60 Rail Link bus has disappeared from the departure board in the front concourse and that, in case of delay, there is no communication at all between First Bus and the train operators. There are now more and more ways of making quick and easy contact and less and less real communication. Lack of will seems to be the stumbling block.

In some statements issued by National Express East Coast (NEXC) there have been suggestions that, in the interests of prevention of fraudulent travel, ticket gates might be installed at Berwick station. If this were to go ahead, a number of questions about the layout of the entrance concourse would have to be addressed, given that the gates would have to be located to take account of passengers using the lift to the footbridge. It is difficult to see how this could be done without denying access to the Costa coffee stall to people who were not travelling. It seems to be quite popular and its managers would no doubt have something to say about any such change. More importantly, there would have to be a member of staff on duty at the gates at all times to help people with luggage or prams, people with mobility problems and those who happen to have tickets which the machines do not recognise. An example is the machines at Glasgow Queen Street, which do not like Berwick to Wemyss Bay through tickets and will not open the gate for these. Given the reduction in staffing levels which we have recently seen, this would be a rather strange development. In point of fact, ticket gates are not the solution for a station of

Berwick's size and all that they would do would be to check that a passenger had a ticket valid for a journey from Berwick, perhaps to Dunbar, but not for the journey that (s)he was actually undertaking. Gates are no substitute for thorough and regular on-board checks. Anent ticket checking, I recently drew to the attention of Arriva the failure of their staff to carry out any kind of check on a moderately-loaded train on an evening journey from York to Berwick and in due course received a rambling reply, the general gist of which was that it was not always possible to carry out checks on short journeys. Is York to Berwick a short journey?

On 10 September I had occasion to use the 14:34 hrs from Berwick for an onward journey from Waverley to Motherwell. There was clearly a problem with the up train, as a scratch set was waiting in platform 9 at Waverley and did not leave at the advertised time of 15:23. No announcements were made, either by the station loudspeakers or by the train staff as to what was or was not happening - not very helpful when one is going to a meeting and might want to advise of a later arrival. However, in due course a number of passengers arrived, clearly having been transferred from the service from London and we set off 25 minutes late. Coach B was locked out of use due to a defective door. The toilets in coaches C and D were in a filthy condition and should also have been locked out of use. Rubbish blocked most of the doors in these two coaches and all the doors in coaches E and F. On arrival at Motherwell, we found that the door from the buffet car was also blocked and we had to ask the attendant to clear this to allow us to alight. No one had thought to ask the cleaner who was on platform 9 at Waverley to do anything about the rubbish before the train left. We saw nothing of the conductor during the journey. It might have been expected that he would have both checked tickets and done something about the blocked doorways, but he did not come through the train at any time in the 40 minute journey. The managers of a public building whose toilets were found to be in a comparable state and whose exits were blocked by rubbish would be in trouble and it seems odd that a train operating company is not treated in the same way. My travelling companion wrote to the Chief Executive of NEXC on 11 September but has not yet had an acknowledgement, let alone a full reply.

RAGES on the Television

On 24 October, the BBC's Landward magazine featured our campaign. Barrie Forrest, RAGES Vice-chairman and Reston Representative, was interviewed along with local twins Rebecca and Rhianne.

He opened the feature by saying that RAGES wanted a local rail service between Edinburgh and Berwick with the opening of two new stations and a better rail service to Dunbar.

Rebecca who goes to Strathclyde University has to travel to Berwick which adds 40 miles to her journey. Rhianne goes to Stirling University and both see that a station at Reston would be an advantage to the village.

Barrie commented on the cost of fuel and the bus which takes two hours to get to Edinburgh. A station at Reston would help to keep the young people in the village and surrounds.



Barrie with Rebecca and Rhianne being interviewed alongside the track at Reston. Photograph: Courtesy of BBC Landward