

The Rages Rag

Newsletter of Rail Action Group, East of Scotland
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Another Winter of Discontent Looms for North Berwick Service Passengers

James King reports

The five elderly 1960-built class 305 electric units that attempt to provide the North Berwick service face another unplanned winter in service due to continuing problems with the introduction of 40 new Alstom-built class 334 "Juniper" electric units in Glasgow. The eventual introduction of the Junipers will start a cascade of stock that will see the 305s replaced by some of ScotRail's 1985-built class 318s. ScotRail advises RAGES that the introduction of the 318s, which presently run between Glasgow and Ayrshire, will not now take place until May 2001.

This is due to technical issues with the Junipers and a recent incident at Glasgow Central when two Juniper units on test ran away at slow speed, with test staff on board, before derailing on catch points outside the station. Because of this their

Railtrack certification has been withdrawn until the manufacturer has taken remedial action to prevent a recurrence. The first Juniper was delivered to ScotRail as long ago as August 1999!

RAGES is pressing ScotRail for alternative units to be hired in short-term to replace the 305s until the 318s can be transferred. ScotRail has, in fact, returned a number of modern express diesel units to the leasing companies, some of which could have been used.

The cascade is:

Class 334 Juniper



Class 318 to North Berwick service



Editorial comment

This issue focuses unashamedly on the North Berwick service. The Rail Passengers Council "recognises that passengers on the North Berwick service are having a torrid time", yet not only is there inaction from ScotRail but we also see the company returning reliable modern express diesel multiple units to the leasing company while we have to suffer constant breakdowns, late running and cancellations on the old 305s.

RAGES questions both ScotRail's customer focus and its commercial acumen. On the one hand it claims that it cannot invest in the service by providing more trains or better quality units until the replacement 318s arrive in May 2001, while on the other it makes demonstrably little effort to collect all the fare revenue owing to it on services throughout Scotland.

What is ScotRail playing at? We shall, again, be asking them. We will let you know what the answer

Fare's Fair ScotRail!

As many know to their benefit, it is perfectly possible for large numbers of commuters to travel every day between stations on the North Berwick line to Edinburgh without being asked to pay a penny in fares. RAGES first drew this to ScotRail's attention last year but despite a token response for a few days this summer ScotRail is still making no effort at all to collect fares from large numbers of passengers.

The problem is threefold:

- lack of ticket buying facilities at stations, particularly those nearest to Edinburgh
- insufficient on-train ticket collectors
- lack of barrier checks.

Apart from creating a culture of dishonesty, this policy of under-collecting revenue leads to under-investment in services. RAGES has made several suggestions for resolving this problem, but all have been ignored.

Sadly, the problem is not limited to the North Berwick line. Your correspondent regularly observes the same situation on other ScotRail services. Come on ScotRail, is your subsidy so large that you need not bother with fares? No, of course not, but you cannot go on arguing that it is too expensive to provide additional services if you make such token efforts to collect fares!

Welcome to this issue of The Rages Rag, which we intend to publish quarterly. It will be the main means of communication to our members.

Inside Issue 7:

- More North Berwick - Page 2
- Report on local service - Page 2
- CCTV report - Page 2
- Reston news - Page 3
- Franchising support - Page 3
- Dunbar news - Page 4
- Meeting with MSP - Page 4

The editor acknowledges the railway and national press as sources of some information within and also invites contributions which should be sent to him at the address at the foot of page 4.

Filling the gap

From the start of the new winter timetable, the 18.14 from Edinburgh to North Berwick became the 18.12. This means there is now a gap of no less than 1 hour 25 minutes until the next service.

For those who do not get away from work until 18.00, or who work some distance from Waverley, the 18.12 is too soon, but the 19.37 is too late. RAGES is aware of many people in this category, for whom the only option is driving to and from work due to the very poor 'bus services parallel to the line.

ScotRail has been asked to fill this gap but claims it cannot afford to. How about collecting fares....?

On yer bike

The number of people cycling to work is increasing steadily. It is not unusual for a North Berwick service train to carry six or more bikes in the guard's van. Thankfully ScotRail's policy is to carry bikes free, making between three and six spaces available on its trains.

RAGES is pressing ScotRail to ensure there will be sufficient space on the 318s when they eventually come into service next year.

Is refranchising the only answer?

It seems that the only answer to many of our problems with rail services in the RAGES area is refranchising. The ScotRail franchise will be called in next year for review by the Regulator. This will give ScotRail and competing Train Operating Companies the opportunity to offer new train service and funding packages in order to win a longer franchise.

RAGES argues that ScotRail should not wait for refranchising. Give us the improved services we need on the North Berwick line now and you will be more likely to win passenger support for your bid than delaying until refranchising.

Bits 'n' pieces

One of the North Berwick service class 305s is reputedly known by ScotRail staff as "Damien" because of its unreliability. (The editor will tell you which one in exchange for a donation to RAGES meagre coffers.)

The Scottish Association for Public Transport has called for the scrapping of Edinburgh's planned £50m CERT guided busway scheme in favour of a light rail system which it says will be better value for money.

The reason why ownership of Railtrack is split from that of trains is not, as most people believe, due to Treasury insistence but to comply with EU directive 91/440 which lays down that track ownership must be separated from that of train operating companies.

The Rail Regulator has had to order Railtrack to be more forthcoming in its supply of information about the rail network to builders of new trains so that they can be brought into service more quickly.

The present government has invested less public money in the railways in the past 12 months than the previous administration did in its last 12 months in office.

UK passenger business is up by a third since privatisation 5 years ago.

Construction of the first two stations on the new £9m Edinburgh Crossrail route could begin shortly if the Council approves their design. Services are not due to begin until 2002.

On the box

RAGES was invited to see ScotRail's modern CCTV control centre in Dunfermline, and most impressive it is. In our area, Musselburgh and Wallyford are already covered, with all the other stations scheduled to be brought on-line in the next year.

If you ever doubted what these cameras can see, be under no illusions - the answer is everything! All the cameras record all of the time - in amazing detail. Where they have been installed, crime has dropped substantially and many criminals have been caught, including one murderer who was trying to escape by train.

The cameras are connected to a push button enquiry and help system. If you are a lone person travelling late at night you can even ask the operator to keep an eye on you until the train comes. Well done ScotRail!

Membership

We now have over 180 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.

Local Dunbar service?

As we reported in the last newsletter, RAGES wrote to the relevant Train Operating Companies, inquiring if they would consider a local Edinburgh - Dunbar - Berwick service.

- GNER - "We are interested in seeing how we can expand further services between Edinburgh and Dunbar ..." Due to the increase in the number of services stopping at Berwick, "... a case for further services in addition to that is probably doubtful." They indicated that it would be kept "under review".
- Virgin Trains - They agreed on "... a greater emphasis

being put on local rail services for Edinburgh". However, they did not consider it to be their "role", but not "inconceivable" that they might introduce additional stops on their Cross Country or, if successful, GNER replacement services.

- Northern Spirit - They were not interested and have no plans.
- ScotRail - They are interested, but not until they are called for re-franchising. Then they will or might make proposals.

Reston affairs

by Tom Thorburn and Barrie Forrest

Scottish Borders Council informed us that they would give a presentation at the Berwickshire Area Committee meeting in Reston on the East Coast Main Line franchise replacement.

These Area Meetings have been an invaluable source to RAGES, enabling us to get our point across to Councillors, Directors of Planning, Technical Services, Asset Management and lastly, but by no means least, the Convenor.

With only seven days to play with, we had to act quickly in order to get a good turnout for the meeting to be held on Tuesday 22nd August. With the aid of our friends at: The Berwickshire News; Radio Borders and Border Television, Barrie set about informing the public about the meeting. The highlight of Barrie's work was an interview on Border Television's Six O'clock News. This came across very well with the main points for Reston being brought out.

Building on this success, we were further rewarded with an excellent turnout at the meeting - in excess of seventy! The Chairman of the Berwickshire Area Committee - Councillor Waddell thanked RAGES, Reston & Auchencrow Community Council and everyone for coming to the meeting (these meetings normally attract 5 to 10 members of the public).

Our letters to GNER and Virgin Trains, along with their replies, were distributed to Councillors and John Ross Scott, Chairman of SESTRAN. Briefly these letters said that both operators were aware that paths would be required for new local services, but Virgin additionally said that they would consider stopping some of their trains at re-opened stations at Reston and East Linton.

Again it was emphasised to the meeting the requirement to

have Reston re-opened given the public attendance, whereupon Convenor Drew Tulley replied that Reston would be included in the Structure Plan.

Again we attended the Berwickshire Area Committee meeting on 26th September. Armed with the Scottish Executive's publication, "Advice to the sSRA on the ECML Franchise Replacement", we asked if the Council could write to the Executive to bring forward the Reston Station re-opening from long term into the short/medium term (it also lists East Linton as long term). The written reply from Scottish Borders Council's Transport Policy Manager Peter Fuller included:

"The Council has already raised with the sSRA and the Scottish Executive the possibility of this re-opening project being included in the next ScotRail franchise. Negotiations for this franchise are expected to start during 2001. We therefore consider that it is feasible to secure to a local service between Edinburgh and Berwick early in the new ScotRail franchise. This would be in the medium term as far as the East Coast franchise is concerned rather than the longer term".

The Convenor has recently written to the Scottish Executive to reiterate this view.

The latest

Scottish Borders Council's Transport Policy Manager Peter Fuller announced at the Berwickshire Area Committee meeting on 24th October that Reston Station would be included in their Local Transport Strategy Document. On behalf of RAGES, we publicly thanked Scottish Borders Council, Councillors and Convenor Tulley.

Franchising support

The East Lothian Courier reported recently that John Home Robertson, our MP/MSP, had written to the director of Passenger Rail Franchising giving his support to GNER for the forthcoming East Coast Main Line re-franchising. He said that they had a good record on punctuality and reliability and feared that East Lothian rail users would suffer if Virgin Trains were to succeed in the bid.

He also wished to see the service from Edinburgh to Dunbar improved, as do RAGES of course, and was of the opinion that Virgin Trains saw Dunbar as a nuisance!

Virgin had ruled out a parkway station in Musselburgh, which GNER was promoting.

It is also believed that Gavin Strang and Susan Deacon, MP and MSP respectively for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh and East Lothian Council also support GNER

Wanted

Rail passengers who want to make a difference

We have been asked by the Rail Passengers Council, previously known as the Rail Users Consultative Committee, to support their "exciting new initiative". The RPC is the passenger watchdog for England, Scotland and Wales.

This trial project, known as the "Network of Networks", is sponsored by the shadow Strategic Rail Authority and will electronically link about 400 passengers and their official watchdog.

They are interested in hearing from passengers who:

- Are frequent or occasional users of trains run by ScotRail or Virgin CrossCountry (Ed: I am sure that comments from GNER passengers would also be welcome)
- Have an e-mail address and access to the internet
- Can spare about 10 minutes each week to participate in a dynamic interactive communications network
- Are observant and keen to let the passengers' watchdog know what is happening 'on the ground'

If this is you, send your name and e-mail address to passengers@rail-watchdog.com as soon as possible. They will then e-mail you further details and an application form to complete.

RAGES has also been asked as a group to participate and James King has kindly volunteered. It would be of interest to RAGES if you copied at least your initial request to us at

Meeting with MSP

Barrie met with Euan Robson MSP for Berwickshire on Friday 27th October to discuss the status of Reston Station. Euan was thanked for his work to date in the campaign to have Reston re-opened and was delighted to read our letter from Scottish Borders Council.

On his side, he was hoping to meet Railtrack in the early to mid part of November to discuss the subject of getting the passing loops put in at Reston and a cost projection for the platforms. The platform costs should be much reduced with the loops in place.

He is also looking to have a meeting with ScotRail to

discuss the local passenger service from Edinburgh to Berwick in readiness for when their franchise is reviewed in the early part of 2001. He also emphasised (which we have been saying for some time also) that it is inevitable that developers will move further down through East Lothian and Berwickshire to build affordable housing for the Edinburgh market.

Barrie expressed the point that we were disgusted that Railtrack had not had the common courtesy to get back to Euan re his enquiries about station build costs, after all it is our money that Railtrack are begging our governments for to invest in THEIR Railway.

Dunbar news

by Tom Thorburn

Thankfully one of RAGES' long-term requests for Dunbar station has finally been delivered - the station booking office opening times display board. The once in a while traveller might think "so what". Well Dunbar is a very busy station, and queues very long, so much so that even with two staff on duty, there are still a lot of passengers without their tickets when the train arrives. This sometimes leads to tension on the train when the ticket-less passenger is asked to pay a premium on top of their fare - totally unjustified. Getting back to the display board, at least now the intrepid passenger can plan a quieter time to visit the ticket office to purchase their tickets.

The East Coast Main Line was closed between Berwick and Dunbar on 30th August for two days due to severe flooding and a small landslide at Grantshouse. Buses were provided to

transfer passengers between the above stations, which in my opinion is always better than from Edinburgh in circumstances such as the above, due to the time taken for a bus to get out of Edinburgh. If there is a point that has to be learnt on occasions such as this, it must be to keep the passenger informed as to what is happening. Unfortunately on this very wet morning in question, Dunbar passengers inform us that they were at a total loss as to what was happening with their train to Edinburgh i.e. no public address announcements at all, and as the first train conveys around 200 Dunbar passengers, it is very difficult for everyone to make an enquiry. In defence of these PA announcements, I have found them to be very efficient with the latest (but usually not the best of news) up to date information conveyed.

Ramblings

by Tom Thorburn

On Saturday 14th October, I took advantage of a ScotRail £12 return fare to/from any station in Scotland (with the exception of Lockerbie and yes - Dunbar!). This cheap fare, courtesy of a Scottish tabloid, took me from Drem to Keith and back all in the same day, such that I could visit the newly re-opened Keith and Dufftown Railway. I have two main reasons for sharing my experiences with you on this memorable trip.

Firstly, contrary to all those stories that you read in the press, everything went as it should have - yes, I even have to thank Mr Branson. Why? because if his Virgin train had not been four minutes late that morning, there was every possibility that I would have missed the 08.27 from Drem due to it being held on the North Berwick branch until the Virgin 125 had passed.

Having caught the 09.10 Edinburgh to Aberdeen service on what was a beautiful day, I was aware on nearing Aberdeen, that we were running some five minutes late. With only seven minutes between my original arrival time and the Keith/Inverness departure time, I enquired from the conductor as to whether they would hold the Inverness train and to this end he reassured me that there would be no problem. My train

arrived in Keith spot on time. On the return leg all went well again, even with the new class 170 only being powered from two of its three cars. Again I enquired from the conductor, would they hold the Dundee to Edinburgh service as I could see we were running some 7-8 minutes late and again came the reply, "don't worry sir". On alighting at Dundee, I was ushered across to the Edinburgh train. So the moral of this story is, yes, everything went well, and staff could not have been more helpful, even down to the very pleasant and efficient lady whom I booked the tickets through. I have to take my hat off to those conductors though - how they can manage the rowdy that has had one too many!

Secondly, taking advantage of these cheap fares must go some way to proving to the Train Operating Companies, irrespective of who they are, that they will get a lot more custom if the price is right.

I also had a great time at the Keith and Dufftown Railway. Very pleasant staff, a well-organised railway and a journey through some lovely scenery. I would thoroughly recommend it.