

Narrow gauge challenge

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When I took on the post of Railfuture heritage railways liaison officer it soon became apparent that some members expected me to initiate recruitment of new Railfuture members from heritage railways.

That's fine, but shouldn't we already be doing just that in our own areas? After all, we all know where our local heritage railways and other pro-railway centres are, don't we? And we are on the spot, for personal contact and follow-up calls.

So come on members and branches: "Wake up!"

I have long pondered over the question why we use, support and promote railways.

The question sparks off endless debate and there is of course no definitive answer.

Our collective answers are likely to include the following key words comfort, convenience, dislike (of the alternatives), economy, efficiency, escape (from the alternatives), habit, interest, irresistible attraction, no alternative, nostalgia, order, personal circumstances, safety, sanity, space, speed – and many others.

Now bearing the above seriously in mind and recognising that heritage railways are seen as a fringe concern of Railfuture anyway, here's a narrow gauge railway challenge.

As some members will already be aware a "new" narrow gauge railway is under reconstruction in North Wales – the Welsh Highland



WHERE NO STANDARD GAUGE TRAIN CAN TAKE YOU: A Welsh Highland train approaching Rhyd Ddu. The open wagon behind the loco is for passengers' cycles Picture: JOHN GINNS

Railway, the newest, longest, the most expensive and the most spectacular of all the Great Little Trains of Wales.

Never mind its background and history – you can read about that elsewhere. The special thing about the Welsh Highland Railway, according to its own public relations, is that it is being massively financed not only as a tourist attraction but as a means of public transport through Snowdonia, an area in which car access is already closely managed by the Snowdonia National Park authorities.

The Welsh Highland Railway has so far received financial support, running into many millions of pounds, from the Millennium Commission, the European Regional Development Fund, the Welsh Development Agency and the Wales Tourist Board.

The line is built to a nominal 2ft gauge, but in common with many narrow gauge railways much of the rolling stock is 6ft, 7ft or wider.

The real restriction comes on

speed. But does that always have to matter? It all depends upon your reasons for preferring railway travel, as mentioned above.

On completion in 2009 the Welsh Highland Line will be 25 miles long from Caernarfon to Porthmadog, via Beddgelert, a journey not possible by any other railway, although there are adequate bus services including the Sherpa network covering the mountain areas.

The line is already open between Caernarfon and Rhyd Ddu (pronounced Ridd Vee), at which point it has climbed nearly 650ft in its 12-mile journey from sea level at Caernarfon.

The line uses, among others, ex-South African Railways Beyer Garrett steam locomotives and a South African-built Cummins-powered, Allison-transmission Funkey diesel locomotive, as well as ex-SAR rolling stock.

You don't have to be a steam nostalgia merchant to appreciate this lot at work. It is impressive. It is a real railway, but it's not part of the forward stampede.

Construction has begun on the final push, all in one phase, as no temporary termini are allowed, to Porthmadog. I was in the area this summer and saw preparatory work beginning at several locations.

At Beddgelert where the line makes a series of reverse curves to gain or lose height, the trackbed had been cleared and fenced off by contractors. At Porthmadog about a mile of new ballast had been placed, awaiting track laying this winter.

Also at Porthmadog the "new" line will cross Network Rail's Cambrian Coast line at approximately 80 de-

grees on the level, then run a short distance through the "backs" then along the streets to connect into the existing Ffestiniog railway station.

The local people aren't too happy about this. They say the trains will cause road traffic congestion! But the railway is coming.

If there is a flaw in all of this it is the fares. The normal adult return fare from Caernarfon to Rhyd Ddu is around £16, hardly a "public transport" fare by the worst standards. How do we challenge this?

And with a maximum speed of 25mph and many slower restrictions, it is hard to see how this line can really compete with car mentality. Knock, knock, North Wales branch. Are you there? Here's a challenge. Isn't this railway development? There's a gap in the ideas market.

So what about us Railfuture people? If we go to Wales on holiday do we use the Cambrian Coast line, or Chester and the North Wales route or do we use the car?

Once we are there will we use the Welsh Highland and its Ffestiniog link to travel to Blaenau Ffestiniog for Network Rail to Llandudno Junction and beyond, or vice versa? Or from Porthmadog to Beddgelert and Caernarfon? If not why not? Or are we going to reach for the car keys, insisting that the Welsh Highland Railway at 25mph is just another very expensive fun ride and doesn't belong to the real world of railways?

It all depends. What is your reason for preferring rail travel?

For more details on the Welsh Highland Railway see www.fest-trail.co.uk and www.whr.co.uk

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PUBLICITY: A Welsh Highland Line leaflet