

£4.60 for each £1 spent

Community railways

By Chris Austin
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Community rail partnerships are supported by train operators and local authorities, while many are also backed by Network Rail and user groups, and sometimes by other agencies such as national parks, universities or passenger transport executives. The object is to encourage use of the railways, to operate them efficiently and to support economic development.

The concept of community railways was pioneered by Dr Paul Salvesson, on the Penistone line 15 years ago.

He formed the Association of Community Rail Partnerships. Later, in 2004, I helped put together the community rail development strategy which, following abolition of the Strategic Rail Authority, was adopted by the Government and has since been amended and improved by the Department for Transport, working with Network Rail, train operators and ACoRP.

The association's aim is to reverse the downward spiral of many local lines by working to raise the profile of the railway, and to increase earnings by carrying more passengers.

It also aims to engage with local people to make sure the railway is more flexible in meeting community needs as far as possible. An important part of the strategy is also to reduce the high cost of operating the lines.

Community railways today

These ideas caught people's imagination and spread like wildfire. There are now about 60 community rail partnerships covering more than 70 lines, and around 30 station adoption or station friends groups which are members of ACoRP.

The DfT has designated 27 lines as community railways, making it easier to try innovative schemes to improve earnings or reduce costs.

They are also eligible for access to a small development fund to stimulate initiatives. The first award went to Clitheroe line CRP for its educational video about the Ribble Valley line. This was linked to the education syllabus and is used in conjunction with visits to the line by schoolchildren, for many of whom this is their first train ride.

There are many other ways of engaging with the local community, and different partnerships have developed their own approach to meet local preferences. Popular events include music trains, rail ale trails, and guided walks based on the railway.

Rail ale trails bring people into rural areas for a drink and a meal, with benefits to local pubs which are often under threat from supermarket sales, and of course, do so in a responsible way, with no need to drink and drive. Similarly, music



Chris Austin OBE is Railfuture's new heritage railway and community rail liaison officer. He retired last year as head of public affairs at the Association of Train Operators, after a railway career spanning 42 years. As an executive director of the Strategic Rail Authority, he led the team producing the community rail development strategy in 2004, which now forms the basis of Government policy on rural and local lines.

He is a board member of the Association of Community Rail Partnerships and was the author of ATOC's proposals to reconnect major towns to the rail network, Connecting Communities. He was chairman of the West Somerset Railway from 2003 to 2008 and remains an active volunteer on the line, as well as an adviser to the Heritage Railway Association. He is a member of the Railway Heritage Committee and vice president of the Retired Railway Officers Society.

trains will use a local band, and serve local beer and food on board.

In almost every case, the effort has been well worth while, and community rail lines have maintained passenger growth throughout the recession, with some serving holiday areas having double digit growth during 2009.

A report by Transport Regeneration Ltd in 2008 drew together the many benefits that had come from community rail, and we will explore these in future issues.

Most significantly, it concluded that the business case for community rail was excellent, with £4.60 worth of benefit for every £1 spent.

Volunteers play a major part cleaning or improving stations, tending station gardens or visiting schools.

Nationally, this voluntary effort is worth a staggering £27 million. What a tremendous effort, and one that deserves wider publicity for this secret army of supporters who do so much for their local communities and for their railway.

The Cumbrian experience

The Cumbrian Coast Line from Carlisle to Barrow is a hidden gem. It hugs the coast for miles and on fine days affords spectacular views of the Galloway peninsula, and even the Isle of Man. It serves his-

toric towns such as Maryport and Whitehaven, and links with the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway.

It is a lifeline for workers at Sellafield and for schoolchildren travelling to towns such as Workington.

It has prospered under the enlightened management of Northern, and with support from Cumbria County Council and its energetic rail officer, John Kitchen.

In 2009, it became a designated community railway and almost immediately delivered two stunning projects which have shown a real 'can do' approach.

The Harrington Hump Many local stations throughout the country were built in a different age with low platforms, relying on carriage stepboards and handles to enable people to climb into the train.

A set of small steps was needed to close the gap between platform and train in the worst cases. Raising platform heights is very expensive, involving working "under a possession" with the lines closed, and usually the whole platform and its approaches rebuilt to modern standards at vast cost.

It can cost £250,000 per platform and, of course, none of this earns an extra penny in revenue and takes precious investment capital

which could be used to develop and expand the network. The solution developed by Network Rail, working with Northern and with support from the DfT and Cumbria County Council, was a short length of raised platform formed of composite material.

It can be bolted to the existing platform without interrupting the train service.

The result is a short, raised section of platform giving level access to one door on the train, a huge improvement for people with buggies or luggage, the elderly and people in wheelchairs.

The first hump was tested and approved by the Rail Regulator at Harrington. It cost just £25,000 and others will now follow. One has already gone in at St Alban's Abbey.

Workington North Following the devastating November floods, only the railway bridge remained, linking Workington with its hinterland over the river.

At great speed, Network Rail, Northern, and Direct Rail Services, together with the DfT and Cumbria planned and introduced a new park-and-ride station just north of the river, and an enhanced service between Maryport and Workington. This happened within a week, and has proved so popular that it is to run at least until May.

Not only was the work on the ground completed quickly, but the consents required from the Regulator, DfT and Cumbria were achieved in record time and were made possible with DfT funding to cover the extra costs of operation. The results show what can be achieved on a community railway when all the stops are pulled out in an emergency.

Want to know more? See www.acorp.com for further details and links to each partnership and other useful information at www.dft.gov.uk and www.networkrail.co.uk

Volunteers worth £70m

Heritage railways

By Chris Austin
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Railways were Britain's gift to the world, and it is no surprise that there is strong interest in protecting this rich heritage.

I am pleased to become Railfuture's heritage railways liaison officer, and as part of my task, I will keep members in touch with what is happening on heritage railways.

In this issue I will assess the size and significance of the heritage railway movement and its importance to local economies.

In future issues, I hope to describe the extent to which the heritage lines can contribute to local transport needs and report details of heritage railway developments that extend the network or bring new benefits to passengers.

Early days

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first standard gauge preserved railway in Britain. In 1960, the Bluebell Railway started running a service between Bluebell Halt, near Horsted Keynes, and Sheffield Park.

It was part of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway's route from East Grinstead to Lewes which had closed in 1955, only to be reopened the following year after local people discovered a parliamentary requirement to run four trains a day each way on the line.

It took an Act of Parliament to pave the way for the second closure of the line, which took place in 1958, just over two years before part of it was reopened as a preserved railway based at Sheffield Park.

Subsequent extensions have taken it further north to Kingscote and good progress has been made in taking it back to East Grinstead.

The Bluebell, however, was not the first railway to be rescued and run by volunteers. Nine years earlier in 1951 the Talylyn Railway Preservation Society started running regular trains between Towyn and Rhydyronen. The seed for a great British institution, the heritage railway, was sown.

Scope and scale

Today, there are 108 heritage railways running in Britain and Ireland, serving 356 stations and covering 499 route miles.

This is a larger network than London Underground, and the total route mileage equals King's Cross to Blair Atholl! Planned extensions could put this mileage up to 600 over the next few years.

Heritage railways carry 6.2 million passengers and earn around £71 million a year. They make a major contribution to the economy, employing a total of 1,694 people, as well as 16,291 volunteers, and many spend significant sums



WORKING TOGETHER: A Virgin Voyager visiting a West Somerset Railway steam gala in 2007

buying in local goods and services. The variety of lines is enormous, from the Middleton Railway or the Corris Railway, under a mile in length, to the 22.5-mile West Somerset Railway from Norton Fitzwarren to Minehead, shortly to be overtaken by the 40 miles of the combined Welsh Highland and Ffestiniog between Caernarvon and Blaenau Ffestiniog.

Some preserved lines became isolated from the national network as it shrank in the 1960s and 70s. Others are closer, and 18 railways have an operational link with Network Rail, with more planned.

Most heritage railways meet a tourist rather than a public transport need, and in future, I hope to explore the difference between the two, and the opportunities for future development.

Most have a major tourism impact on the regions they serve. Research on the West Somerset Railway showed that every pound spent on train fares was worth an additional £1.90 to the local economy. The railway is the biggest day trip tourist attraction in the area.

Heritage railways also perform an important role in introducing a new generation of people to the concept of train travel and, as in the case of the North York Moors Railway Whitby service, can form part of an integrated travel pack-

age to encourage people out of their cars. In particular, they attract overseas visitors who now have access to detailed information via the internet.

You can find more information at www.heritagetrains.com which links to the individual railways.

Developments for 2010

Heritage railways run over 900 special events a year. Some are old favourites, such as Santa specials or Friends of Thomas.

Perhaps the most significant event for Railfuture members in 2010 will be the completion of the Welsh Highland Railway to Portmadoc, expected in the autumn.

Apart from breathing new life into a railway that was abandoned 73 years ago, the railway was restored to provide a sustainable way to bring visitors into the Snowdonia National Park, and the extension to Portmadoc will give it a link with the Arriva Trains Wales services.

In the interim, trains from Caernarvon will be running as far as Pont Croesor, serving the national park and providing car-free access to Beddgelert and the Aberglaslyn Pass.

Other planned extensions during the year include Weardale Railway services to connect with Northern services at Shildon, and work to establish an interchange station for the Dartmoor Railway with First

Great Western services at Yeoford. By the time you read this, the track will have been relaid across Station Road, Sheringham, between the North Norfolk Railway and Network Rail, and the first through train from Liverpool Street to Holt for over 40 years, appropriately named *The Broadsmart*, will have run.

Norfolk's Whitwell & Reepham society is seeking to extend its line north and south, with an initial aim of restoring three miles of the former Midland and Great Northern.

The North York Moors Railway will again be running trains from Pickering to Whitby, the only example of regular scheduled services from a heritage railway through to the national network.

Elsewhere, West Country railways will have celebrated the 175th anniversary of the Great Western Railway, including the West Somerset's prestigious Spring Steam Gala in March.

The Bluebell will be marking its fiftieth anniversary, and the new rail connection at East Grinstead will allow removal of some of the fill material from Imberhorne tip by rail, prior to extending the line to join up with Southern's Victoria to East Grinstead service.

The Severn Valley Railway will be celebrating its own 40th anniversary this year as well.



CLOSING THE GAP: The Harrington hump improved access and saved more than £200,000

Picture: NETWORK RAIL