

Music, children and railways

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Should Railfuture give its unqualified support to the entire UK heritage railways movement, steam locomotives and museums and every length of track laid in the name of preservation? Or should we be more selective and only "recognise" the more serious railways, the ones that go somewhere or have the potential to serve a useful purpose?

Why do we in Railfuture support railways anyway? Is it nostalgia and a secret longing to preserve the security of our youth? Is it that we believe in railways as a sane and ordered way of life?

Is it that we like to relax with maps and timetables and watch the world drift past the window? Or is it that railways, for some at least, offer the only alternative to sitting in the car or on the bus for those tedious daily journeys to work and back?

While committees deliberate, only to conclude there is no simple answer and the whole question of transport needs a different kind of thinking, let's take a brief look at one corner of the heritage railway world, the Llangollen Railway, in northern mid-Wales.

Running alongside the River Dee for eight miles between the town of Llangollen and the rural Carrog station, the Llangollen Railway is a preserved steam and diesel line aimed primarily at, and dependent

on (like most heritage railways) the touring motorist.

This was once the GWR Ruabon-Barmouth railway, ironically closed in the 1960s, we could argue, not by Dr Beeching but by the touring motorist.

Ruabon and Barmouth are of course both still on the national railway map. You can use the very useful local bus service, including Arriva's Route 94 which parallels the original line all the way to Barmouth and take advantage of the add-on and ask for a "Llangollen Bus" rail ticket.

In common with all heritage lines the Llangollen Railway is run by volunteers managed and supported by a small paid staff. The railway workshops are well known within the heritage railway world, providing engineering services to other heritage lines.

Since the railway is isolated from the national rail network all inward and outward locomotive and rolling stock movements from and to other railways are by road.

Plans are at an advanced stage for a 2½ mile western extension of the line from Carrog to Corwen.

Every year in early July Llangollen comes to life with its international music festival. Participants and competitors, adults and youngsters, from all corners of the globe converge on Llangollen.

Sitting astride the A5 and A539 the town is formally closed off for the

opening procession through the streets. For most of the week the town's car and coach parks, hotels, guest houses, caravan and camp sites are full.

This year, on the opening day, Tuesday 6 July, 500 schoolchildren from the surrounding area, bound for the festival, travelled to the rural Carrog station (having congestion-free access off the A5) in a dozen or so coaches, buses and minibuses which were then parked in the station yard for the day, thus relieving Llangollen town of more congestion.

The children then travelled the last eight miles to Llangollen in a special steam-hauled train. Escorted with military precision by their staff, in their individual school groups, the crocodile of children left the train by the western end of Llangollen station for the short walk to the festival site entrance. In late afternoon the children returned to their road transport at Carrog by a return special train working.

We can be reasonably certain that for many of these children this was their very first railway journey and would probably be their last for a long time, for some a memory to last a lifetime. So can we say top marks from Railfuture for the Llangollen Railway, for environmental and educational initiative?

At the same time this is a sobering reminder that heritage railways, like other businesses, need to balance their books and are constantly

seeking new business opportunities.

Most of the six miles of the former track bed separating Llangollen from the national rail network at Ruabon is intact, although to reinstate the railway will, of course, require multi-million pound investment.

This long-term potential development has been recently highlighted in both the heritage and modern railway press following a planning application by a developer to build residential accommodation across the track bed just east of Llangollen station.

Such a development would block any future rail re-connection to the Llangollen Railway, whether as a Llangollen Railway extension, a community railway or a reinstated national network line. Opposition to this housing development, or at least support for the proposal to leave a clear rail corridor through the site, is gathering momentum and surely needs the formal support of Railfuture.

The whole question of Railfuture recognition of the UK heritage railways movement now sits on the agenda of the network development, passenger, and freight committees.

More information: Llangollen Railway, Abbey Road, Llangollen, Denbighshire, LL20 8SN. Tel: 01978 860979 www.llangollen-railway.co.uk

Developers put an oar into East-West link

The Bedfordshire Railway and Transport Association is working hard to promote the need to rebuild the missing nine-mile rail link between Bedford and the East Coast main line north of Sandy.

It will provide the basic minimum missing piece of rail infrastructure for the East-West rail link between Oxford-Bedford-Cambridge.

The rail link is being promoted by the East West Consortium of some 35 local authorities, agencies and business community reps.

However there has been an argument over whether the railway should be built on an inner or outer route.

The inner route would serve Bedford but the choice of an outer route would leave Bedford stranded from a vital piece of rail infrastructure.

The outer route, even

with a station three miles from Bedford, near Elstow, would make the line virtually inaccessible except by car.

The inner route would allow trains to call at Bedford Midland Station connecting with Thameslink and Midland Mainline services and be accessible for town centre residents, by foot, cycle, car and bus.

There is also a major threat to the old trackbed (inner route) from a rowing lake at Willington.

This rowing lake consortium (www.bedford-rowing-lake.com) has some powerful and wealthy backers.

BRTA however argues:

■ The rowing lake could go anywhere. It should not and need not be at Willington where it would dissect the railway trackbed.

■ A lake is being dug at Kempston alongside the western bypass. The row-

ing lake would be better there.

■ There is also a proposal for a rowing lake near Cambridge. That proposal does not conflict with the strategic rail link corridor.

BRTA had a stall in Bedford on Saturday 24 July and raised 133 signatures on its petition, calling for the protection of the trackbed.

Further stalls are to go ahead. Copies of petition forms can be obtained by sending an SAE to 24c St Michael's Road, Bedford, MK40 2LT.

BRTA is also seeking donations and help with raising funding, getting sponsorship and active people for its committee.

BRTA chairman Richard Pill said: "The success of the Saturday stall shows the public in Bedford are sympathetic with the aspiration of rebuilding this missing rail link.

"There is no East West rail

link for 100 miles north of London between East Anglia and the rest of the network and Bedford-Sandy would provide one.

"We need the public and rail supporters to club together and make their voices heard."

BRTA also staged a conference on Saturday 2 October in Bedford with speakers from Bedfordshire County Council, Chiltern Railways and the Oxon and Bucks Rail Action Committee.

More info: www.brta.org.uk

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Railfuture lottery

July winners:
P Clark, Ayr £56
G Herrmann, Gerrards Cross £35
Colin Rayner, Enfield £21
J Savage, Tring £14
N Campbell, Loughborough £7
D Smith, Nottingham £7

Lew Adams

Former Aslef leader Lew Adams will be guest speaker at the AGM of the National Council for Inland Transport on Saturday 23 October. Mr Adams will speak about the past, present and future of the railways.

The event is at North Woolwich Old Station museum at 14.00. For more info: Frank Tomlins 020 8508 5068

Lakes cheer

The first stage of the environmental impact assessment report submitted to reopen the Keswick-Penrith rail line has been formally approved by the Department for Transport. It is a major step towards opening the line said CKP Railways managing director Cedric Martindale.

The report was compiled by Corus Rail Consultancy and distributed to 60 local groups.

"One more big push is needed," said Mr Martindale.

You can support this scheme by buying bonds or becoming a supporter.

More than 800 bonds have already been issued, raising over £300,000.

Contact: CKP Railways, Solway Park, Carlisle, Cumbria CA2 6TH www.ckp-railways.co.uk