

Two battles won

More than 30 years after Watlington station reopened, the man who made it all possible was remembered – Ron Callaby.

It took Ron only a year from the launch of the campaign to see the station reopened. And it cost British rail only £850 in 1975!

These days we are used to things taking a little longer and costing a lot more.

For instance, it took nine years to get the station cycle shelter opened at Watlington in Ron's memory – and the shed itself cost £5,000.

So the ceremony in August was a celebration of two battles won.

After serving with the Royal Navy in the Second World War, Ron became a relief signalman on the line and later a supervisor at King's Lynn station.

He was appalled at the closure of local stations under the Beeching regime, particularly Watlington, then called Magdalen Road, which closed in 1968.

He joined the Railway Development Society and made a difference by organising public meetings, fund-raising dances and distributing survey forms.

In a talk to an RDS meeting the year Watlington opened, Ron advised: "Get some ladies on your committee. They won't take no for an answer."

He also gave credit to Norfolk councillor Russell Grimmer – who was also a railwayman – and BR managers Clarke and Senter.

The volunteer survey carried out by volunteers in 1974 estimated that 188 people would use the station every day and 244 people would use it once a week. BR insisted on halving the estimates but still decided it was worth reopening.

Ron died in 1991 but his widow Dorothy unveiled a plaque on the cycle shed.

Railfuture members raised £700 by sponsored cycle rides and other ventures with the balance contributed by former operators West Anglia Great Northern thanks to station manager Angela Palmer.

Railfuture director Trevor Garrod told the crowd which gathered at Watlington that it was one of several stations which reopened following the oil crises of the 1970s.

Between 1970 and 1974, 18 stations reopened and since 1975 around 280 stations have reopened.

Watlington had only 14 trains a day in 1975 but now it has 44. In just two years from 2002 to 2004, passenger numbers increased by 33%.

"From next year, Watlington will be one train change away from Paris, Lille and Brussels when the Channel Tunnel high speed rail station opens at King's Cross," said Trevor.



LEADING BY EXAMPLE: Railfuture's Clara Zilahi, left, with Ron Callaby's daughter Elizabeth Hawkins, his widow Dorothy, Fen Line campaigner Robert Stripe, and Railfuture's Trevor Garrod in the cycle shed dedicated to Ron at Watlington, Norfolk

Picture: PETER BIRD (courtesy of LYNN NEWS)

"It is time there was a national plan to reopen more rail stations so that more people have access to these facilities. At the moment we are too reliant on people like Ron Callaby, and local councillors and rail managers with open minds." Watlington also benefited from electrifica-

tion in the 1980s even though a few years before, the *Eastern Daily Press* belittled the idea of even running electric trains to Norwich!

"We also need a national plan for railway electrification," said Trevor. Amazingly in September 2006, the North West Rail Campaign re-

ported that the Government "has recently commissioned a study to assess the economic case for electrifying more of the rail network in response to growing concern about the security of energy supplies and the need to reduce carbon emissions."

And one battle lost

By Jerry Alderson
jerry.alderson@virgin.net

Readers of *Railwatch* 107 will remember that former Secretary of State for Transport Alistair Darling gave permission in December to destroy forever the Cambridge to St Ives Railway to make way for a busway. However, he did not commit the Government to funding the busway scheme, which was then estimated at £86.5million.

On 30 June the Department for Transport, under his successor Douglas Alexander, announced that the cost of the busway had leaped to £116million – more than double the £55million estimate of 2001, when the Government asked Cambridgeshire County Council to develop the "cheaper than a railway" scheme.

Now the DfT will fund £92.5million of this "cheap" scheme while £22.5million will come from developers. No observer can believe there is a level playing field between rail and bus when light rail schemes that have

gone over budget (some by 40%) have been cancelled by the DfT, but a guided busway with a 75% cost increase since the initial bid for funding in July 2003 is allowed to go ahead without any reduction in the scope of the project.

The Cambridge And St Ives Organisation (Cast.Iron), which had fought hard to reopen the railway line (having developed the scheme, produced a business plan and raised several million pounds privately) was "staggered" that Government would willingly spend so much of our money on an unwanted and unnecessary scheme to move buses off the roads rather than cars and lorries.

The world's longest guided busway – and the largest scheme ever undertaken by Cambridgeshire County Council – was given the go-ahead at a meeting on 18 June.

Fewer than half of its elected members voted in favour. Seventeen (one in four) voted against.

Cast.Iron has written an open let-

ter to councillors asking them to "reconsider very carefully all the implications of the scheme" as they are being "taken for a ride to do the Government's bidding for an unproven scheme". It fears that council taxpayers who "rely on their local councillors to protect them from central government domination of local issues" have become the "unwilling subjects of a huge experiment".

Although the chance to reopen the railway seems utterly lost, Cast.Iron's executive has decided that the organisation will remain in existence to ensure the scheme is monitored not just to the next elections, but well beyond, so that if the busway is a failure – as expected – a repeat mistake will be politically impossible.

Having joined Cast.Iron at the very beginning to see the railway reopened I have decided to stand down as an executive in order to devote more time to my duties as vice-chairman of Railfuture. See also: <http://www.castiron.org.uk>