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An eventful time

By Mike Crowhurst

Railfuture chairman

It has been a busy few months for meetings of one sort or another this summer and autumn. The following is a brief overview in chronological order, to keep members in the picture.

First, and most ambitious, was our campaigning conference at Staffordshire University, Stoke on Trent, on 1 July, ably organised by vice-chairman Jerry Alderson, to whom all credit is due. This was a new venture in that it was arranged as a residential weekend, with activity over 48 hours from Friday to Sunday.

This proved highly successful, thanks not least to the excellent hospitality of the university and to almost tropical weather. A full programme of 12 expert speakers was enjoyed in air-conditioned comfort and an enjoyable visit to the Churnet Valley Railway followed.

A full report of the conference has been produced by Philip Bisatt (obtainable from Jerry). Email: jerry.alderson@virgin.net

In August, having suggested almost in passing to Chris Austin at the Association of Train Operators that we ought to have a meeting, I was delighted to receive an invitation by return to fix a date, and in due course four of us met with Chris and two of his colleagues over lunch on 12 September.

Given ATOC's remit to represent the operating companies, we were never going to agree on everything, and duly differed on many fares issues.

But they were receptive to many of our points on, for example, the need to simplify the fares structure, and the need for better information, including international ticketing.

A full report of the meeting is available from Howard Thomas, passenger committee chairman, 24 South Primrose Hill, Chelmsford, Essex CM1 2RG.

The next event was the Community Railfest organised by ACoRP in Darlington on 22-24 September. Railfuture maintained a presence throughout the event on Darlington station, and the local branch was represented at the conference on the Friday.

All credit is due to Gordon Barclay and his team of helpers. With a succession of attractions at Bank Top, North Road and Shildon, it was another busy weekend, only slightly marred by having to compete with a new 185 TransPennine set in full voice on the adjacent platform at the main Bank Top site!

Meanwhile we had a date, 10 October, for a return visit to the Department for Transport to see Rail Minister Derek Twigg – or so we thought. But Mr Twigg was replaced by Tom Harris, so once more we failed to see the same minister a second time! Nevertheless

the meeting went ahead as planned with the new man. Again, four of us arrived expecting about an hour, only to find this cut to half an hour, so many topics we had planned to raise were touched on only briefly or not at all.

Franchising featured prominently in the discussion. The minister denied that rail competed with roads for public money, and expressed the view that the structure of the industry was now about right.

He challenged many of our views, quoted some favourite Government statistics, trotted out the usual "fresh air" comment yet again, and asked us what we thought the Government's motives were – not an easy question to answer!

We also noted that unlike previous occasions, the civil service team supporting him were totally uncommunicative, which seemed a bad sign. Not altogether a very encouraging meeting, but we followed it up by letter and will seek another meeting in the New Year. Full report of the meeting is available from Norman Bradbury, policy committee secretary, 30 The Mount, Worcester Park, Surrey KT4 8UD.

A few days later on Friday 13 October, board member Andrew Macfarlane attended a conference organised by the Skipton-East Lancs Rail Action Partnership on the proposed reopening of the Skipton-Colne line. A brief report appears on *Railwatch* page 9 but a fuller report is available from Andrew. Email: andrew@mcrua.fsnet.co.uk

Next on the agenda was Railfuture's annual Rail Users Groups Conference in Reading on 4 November. Report on *Railwatch* pages 12-13.

Four days later on 8 November several members attended a conference on Passenger Focussed Franchises, organised in Birmingham by Passenger Focus.

This featured both Tom Harris and his shadow Stephen Hammond – in the same meeting.

The minister was questioned in depth on the CrossCountry franchise specification, and on issues of "commercial confidentiality" of data. We learnt more about rebuilding plans for Birmingham New St this time. We went to see Passenger Focus again on 5 December.

In the meantime two London branch officers have met with shadow transport secretary Chris Grayling, and we will be represented at Conservative regional discussion meetings.

Finally, alongside the steady stream of rail utilisation strategy consultations, franchise specifications, select committee inquiries, and other conferences attended by leading Railfuture members, the autumn brought two major Government reports: Eddington and Stern. Sir Nicholas Stern's report on climate change showed that the science of climate change is now almost uni-

versally accepted. Stern provides the economic analysis to back it up and all we need now is the political will to act.

The agenda is inexorably moving in favour of sustainable transport. Let us hope the railways will be allowed to seize the opportunity it offers them. If so, rail will provide the only environmentally sustainable non-local mode of transport.

Like the proverbial curate's egg, Rod Eddington's report seemed to be good in parts!

On roads, he has at least endorsed the idea of road pricing in some form. While not exactly saying build no more roads, he put the emphasis on small-scale improvements.

Hopefully that would rule out not just the mega-motorway widenings but also some of the old favourites that keep bouncing back, like the Hastings bypass, the Stonehenge scheme, the East London River Crossing and so on.

On railways, he is more equivocal. Yes he wants the train to take more of the strain, but again the emphasis is on minor enhancements to remove bottlenecks and make better use of existing capacity – longer trains and platforms and signalling improvements.

He is lukewarm on high speed, and thankfully even less keen on Maglev. But the railways need a phased programme similar to that given to the motorway network over the past 50-odd years.

The bad news comes when he turns to aviation. It rather looks as if his airline background has taken over here. Any idea of managing demand by fairer taxation suddenly vanishes as soon as aviation comes into the frame.

Instead we have all the old arguments about flying being essential to the economy and so on. Never mind that aviation is the least sustainable transport mode of all.

He calls for the expansion of airport capacity and in contrast to his prescription for surface modes, the biggest airports should grow most! So much for climate change and the environment.

He should talk to Sir Nicholas Stern. Airport expansion is the last thing we need.

What a pity he has not grasped Greengauge 21's point that if we can replace domestic flights by high speed rail – as other countries have done – the existing airports could handle more long-haul flights (if that is what we want) without needing yet more destructive runway building.

The Eddington Report can be viewed on the Treasury website http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/eddington_transport_study/eddington_index.cfm