

Severnside

By Nigel Bray
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■ ■ Network extension

The long campaign by the branch for regular services between the West Somerset Railway and the national network at Taunton reached a further milestone on 20 July when a direct train, chartered by the WSR, began running from Minehead to Bristol and back on Mondays, Fridays and Saturdays. This was scheduled to continue until the end of August and was aimed at Butlins holidaymakers, although available to other members of the public. The branch aspiration is for daily, all year trains from Minehead to Taunton and our co-chairman John Walker recently had talks with Somerset County Council officials with a view to achieving this goal.

On Saturday and Sunday, 6 and 7 October, a Virgin Voyager was scheduled to travel to Bishops Lydeard on the WSR from Bristol Temple Meads, picking up at Weston-super-Mare and Taunton. It was scheduled to connect with a steam service at Bishops Lydeard for journeys to Minehead.

The Voyager was then programmed to run a shuttle service between Bishops Lydeard and Taunton throughout the weekend for visitors to the West Somerset Railway's autumn steam gala before making the return trip to Weston-super-Mare and Bristol Temple Meads each evening.

Virgin Trains managing director Chris Gibb said: "We are especially pleased to have been able to again help the West Somerset Railway because engineering work during this weekend has presented us with a spare Voyager and crew. This will enable visitors to enjoy the latest in West Country rail travel on the way to a celebration of steam-powered history."

■ ■ Bus-rail connections

Elsewhere in Somerset the branch is pursuing the question of bus-rail connections at Castle Cary with First Great Western. This station has a large catchment area but stops by London trains are infrequent during the hours when buses to and from Shepton Mallet and Street are running, resulting in some missed opportunities. FGW has offered to refer examples to its integration manager.

■ ■ Bridgwater stops

We are asking FGW to consider additional stops at Bridgwater in order to make it easier to travel through to Devon and Cornwall. At present, day return travel is hampered by poor connections in the afternoon and evening from the Exeter direction into the stopping service from Taunton.

■ ■ Potential explored

The secretary responded to Association of Train Operators' recent document, Exploring the Potential, which proposed capacity improvements on the existing network. We welcomed the priority given to doubling the track between Kemble-Swindon and Worle Junction-Weston-super-Mare but argued that more capacity was required in the whole Bristol-Birmingham corridor, including upgrading of freight loops for use by passenger trains. Chris Austin of ATOC sent a fairly supportive reply, although he considered it was better to keep passenger trains running at higher speeds (by using Class 158s on local services) than looping them. But actually 12 ex-Transpennine 158s are due to transfer from FGW to Northern Rail in December.



Rails to Hull docks



TONNES OF OPPORTUNITY: Hull docks

Picture: J Thompson

By Philip Bisatt

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Railfuture members visited Hull docks to see work on a £13million upgrade to clear the way for more freight trains.

ABP, which owns the port, is involved in the scheme – along with Network Rail and Yorkshire Forward – to improve the seven-mile long Hull docks branch line, including the reinstatement of double tracks.

It was good to see upgrading work in progress on some of the reception sidings at King George Dock, in anticipation of extra traffic.

With the exception of the River Hull swing bridge, line speed on the branch is to be raised to 30mph.

Members of Railfuture's freight committee were welcomed to the port in May by commercial manager Phil Coombes.

He showed us King George, Queen Elizabeth and Alexandra Docks.

These are now the main operational docks at Hull, although only King George and Queen Elizabeth Docks have direct rail access.

The port handles 12.7million tonnes per annum, of which coal imports account for 2.5million. Most of this is moved from the port by rail.

Other major traffics include imported timber – where Hull is the leading UK port – steel, containers, aggregates, cement, chemicals, cocoa, animal feeds and scrap metal.

The rail-connected steel terminal at King George Dock is the UK's first fully enclosed steel handling facility, providing all-weather working. King George Dock is the only pas-

senger port on the Humber estuary, handling some one million passengers a year.

The container terminal at Queen Elizabeth Dock currently handles 260,000 boxes (20ft equivalent units) per annum and there are plans for a new container terminal that would almost double that figure.

There must surely be scope to attract some of these on to rail, especially as road access to the port is via the A63, which is heavily congested through the centre of Hull.

Final planning approval for the new two-berth riverside container terminal, at Alexandra Dock, was given in December 2005.

The terminal will accommodate larger container vessels than can currently be handled and the expected growth in short-sea container traffic. Short-sea covers trade with Denmark, Scandinavia, the Baltic, Spain and Portugal, Italy and the Mediterranean.

The terminal will be built after customer contracts are in place.

Alexandra Dock was closed completely between 1983 and 1991, when rail access into the dock was removed by the dismantling of bridges over nearby roads.

An internal railway connection between Alexandra and King George Docks was also removed and later converted into a docks estate road. Rail access was not restored when Alexandra Dock reopened.

Thanks are due to Phil Coombes at ABP and to freight committee member Tony Ross for making arrangements for the visit.



RAILFUTURE MEMBERS: Henry Jones, Peter Wakefield, Tony Ross, Philip Bisatt and Gary Tinsey at the docks Picture: J Thompson

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED: Railfuture needs a lottery organiser and a media spokesperson. If you think you can help, please contact Mike Crowhurst at 0113 286 4844