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## Freshen up by rail and sea

By Trevor Garrod

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Now we have high-speed trains to the Continent and low-cost flights to so many destinations overseas, is there still a role for the traditional ferries and boat trains?

We are unlikely to see a return to the days of 40 years ago when, for example, every morning at Hoek van Holland awaiting the night ferry from Harwich would be international trains for Copenhagen, Berlin, Frankfurt, Basel and elsewhere, with through carriages to such places as Bad Harzburg and Warsaw.

A considerable number of shipping routes can still cater for the leisure market, and to an extent the business market.

For those ports with good rail links, train operators are also well placed for a share of the market.

This year I made three trips by Stena Line, each time with a combined train and boat ticket which gave good value for money.

The *Dutch Flyer* offer by Stena in conjunction with National Express East Anglia and Dutch Railways gives you a single trip from any National Express East Anglia station to any Dutch station for £29. On the night boat, where a cabin is compulsory, you pay extra. In May I was able to use the night ferry on two consecutive nights and spend a day at The Hague, Scheveningen and Delft, and all for £120. There were no hotel bills. I just packed a rucksack and set off.

I repeated this in September, spending a day in Rotterdam, when the total cost had risen slightly to £124. In each of the Dutch cities I bought a one-day travel card which also gave good value for money.

The crossing is slower than when it was operated by the HSS catamaran, but the boat is comfortable and I had a single cabin. At Harwich in the morning I was also able to use the internet terminals to send and check emails while awaiting my train to Ipswich. The service was not very busy when I used it in May, with only eight people on the

connecting train from Ipswich. But in late September there were more than twice that number and the ferry seemed distinctly busier.

Having decided to visit Ireland in late August I considered flying and asked the travel agent for fares and timings. He came back with the offer of an economy return by rail and Stena Line from Lowestoft to Dun Laoghaire for just £54, which made my mind up.

My rail ticket was valid by any reasonable route and so could be used outwards via London and back via Manchester. Stena Line advised that there might be engineering works but did not give details.

To be safe, I allowed extra time and reached Holyhead 90 minutes beforehand.

There was the chance to wander into the old town and there was a left luggage facility if needed. The station also has a pleasant cafe with views over the harbour.

In Dun Laoghaire ferry terminal a sign points 70 yards to the Dublin Area Rapid Transit station which is directly opposite the exit.

The station is staffed and you can easily buy a ticket into Dublin or southwards if you wish.

I chose to walk to a hotel a few minutes from the terminal in this pleasant town, with fine views across Dublin Bay. All very civilised.

Luggage did have to be handed in for the ferry and the handling facilities were quick and efficient.

In Ireland, Stena also offers tickets to a variety of English and Welsh destinations from rail stations and rail-appointed travel agents.

Had I been going to Dublin on business, with time an important factor, I would probably have flown. However, for a leisure trip, much of it also through scenic parts of England and Wales, rail/sea/rail still has a lot to recommend it.

I booked through Travel Cannon Ltd at Saxmundham Rail Station, Tel: 01728 604600.

## First rebuff for cyclists

By Stephen Wade

Train operator First Great Western does not want to "waste" potential seating space by leaving room for bicycles, wheelchairs, prams and heavy luggage.

"We believe that our primary function is to provide for the pedestrian traveller with no more than light, hand luggage," its newly appointed "environmental manager" Andrew Griffiths told astonished delegates to its community rail conference in Bristol on 17 October.

Coupled with its unhealthily cramped seating arrangements, the operator seems determined to reduce the reasons people prefer trains over other modes of transport.

Apart from speed and smooth running, the traditional advantage of railways has always been the railway's capacity to accommodate a lot more of the traveller and his accoutrements than his posterior and his purse.

At the very time when ever more people are understanding what a perfect transport combination bicycles and railways make for both commuting and leisure activities, with more and more people wanting to carry their bikes on trains, FGW would like to banish them, together with other "excess baggage".

Its alternative is bike hire and bike parking facilities on railway stations.

How realistic is that when many stations now do not have staff? FGW does not seem to appreciate that people do not buy an expensive, high-quality bike in order to leave it unused and vulnerable on a railway station while they are obliged to hire and ride someone else's bike.

Neither do FGW apparently understand that not all bike-accompanied trips are return journeys and those which are, are not always returning by the same route to the same station.

The remarks of Mr Griffiths were even more inappropriate given the fact that at the same conference barely one hour earlier, FGW chief operating officer Andrew Haines had been holding forth effusively and at length about how FGW's "vision" was one of "putting customers first", listening to customers and basing their operations and provisions on customer demand rather than any other consideration.

Customers are demanding loud and clear more space for their bikes, luggage and wheelchairs, so why are FGW not listening?

On the brighter side, Andrew Haines and Julian Crow, who chaired the conference on behalf of FGW, told the conference that the new turnback facilities being installed by Network Rail at Clifton Down on the Severn Beach branch line were purely to improve the reliability of the service by preventing late trains from disrupting the entire timetable.

Improving reliability is essential if we are to have a more frequent than hourly service, we were told.

We were also reassured that FGW had no plans to terminate the present 40-minute service at Clifton Down during the off-peak period or at any other time.

On the other hand, the turnback facility, by making possible further and more intensive use of the line, allows for the introduction of through trains to and from destinations beyond Temple Meads.

To this end Julian Crow of FGW advised the conference that FGW will be introducing an experimental Sunday service, between the Severn Beach and Weston-super-Mare.

The biggest and most expensive problems faced by lines with de-staffed stations are those of vandalism and security.

A multifaceted approach to these issues is being pioneered on Severnside. One of these is a new system which combines information with cameras and other security measures which is to be tested on the Severn Beach line (all of the 20 stations are without staff – and if successful could be extended throughout the region).

Another exciting proposal currently on the table is that many local stations could also become travel centres, not only for the railways, but for all travel, giving information and selling tickets for bus, rail air and holidays, locally, nationally and internationally.

Overall the conference was a great success, showing that the idea of community rail partnerships has certainly taken hold and snowballed.