

L'entente cordiale sur les rails

By Philip Bisatt

Railfuture group visit to Avignon 19-25 April 2004

In a year commemorating the centenary of the Anglo-French entente, the annual European group visit by Railfuture members was, appropriately, to Avignon, an historic religious, cultural and political centre, and administrative capital of the Vaucluse department of France.

This was my first experience of a Railfuture group visit, so it was with a keen sense of anticipation that I arrived at Waterloo International, to be met by co-ordinator Trevor Garrod and my 22 fellow participants for the journey to France.

We left Waterloo on the 12.39 Eurostar service to Brussels, changing at Lille Europe on to a TGV for the journey to Avignon. The high speed of the train created a rapidly unfolding panorama of the French countryside, as we moved south from the low-lying Pas de Calais and the Paris basin to the more undulating, or even mountainous terrain fringing the Rhone valley.

After a four-hour journey from Lille, our arrival at Avignon TGV station, on the edge of the urban area, was a few minutes behind time, but there was no problem with the connecting Navette bus into the city centre.

On our first full day in Avignon, we were met by Jean-Claude Capdeville, president of Rail 84, which is affiliated to our sister organisation, the Federation Nationale des Associations d'Usagers des Transports.

An interesting morning was spent at the Avignon Club des Cheminots with local transport campaigners and local officials of the union representing French railway workers.

Topics discussed included the impact of rail privatisation within the UK, the effect



Press coverage: In France

of EU legislation on rail industry structures, the fortunes of Eurotunnel, and the role of the French regional governments in supporting local trains.

It seemed clear that in some areas, decentralisation of funding to the French regions was playing an important part in arresting the long-term decline of local passenger services. There was also evident commitment from our French hosts to retaining SNCF as a public service, and not following the British privatisation model.

The Anglo-French meeting was featured the next day in a local newspaper, together with quotes from our group spokesman, Christopher Butler.

After an exchange of relevant documents between the British and French parties, an excellent lunch was taken, courtesy of our hosts, in the rail union's restaurant adjoining Avignon motive power depot.

A comprehensive tour of the depot with its huge roundhouse – built to replace facilities destroyed by the Resistance in the Second World War, and now a national monument – followed in the afternoon. The day was concluded with an audio-visual presentation by Rail 84 of the local railways in Provence, including reference to the potential for reviving services on closed or underused lines.

On subsequent days, as well as touring Avignon itself with its famous Pont St Benezet and Palais des Papes, members of the group visited various places of cultural or historic interest accessible from the city.

These included Marseille (two Metro lines), Nimes, Arles and Orange. Several people visited Montpellier and sampled its light rail line, which is being progressively integrated with major new developments in the north and south of the city.

The amazing Pont du Gard, a designated World Heritage site, was visited using a bus service from the gare routiere at Nimes, which in common with those in other major towns, adjoins the main railway station.

A number of people also made an enjoyable visit to Anduze for the Train a Vapeur des Cevennes, which runs through some spectacular scenery.

Although this line seems to be still physically connected to the main rail network, the relevant promotional leaflet gave no information on how to reach Anduze by public transport.

It turned out that the nearest SNCF station was some distance away at Ales. We therefore travelled from Nimes to Ales, but only after negotiation with the train staff allowed us to board at Nimes without tickets – there being a long queue at the booking office there.

The new single-unit railcar on the Ales service featured a low-floor centre section to provide level access at French station platforms, and turned out to be fast and comfortable, with plenty of leg room. It goes to show that it is possible to build rolling stock for local services with a passenger environment superior to some of the Sprinter and Pacer trains used in Britain. To try to offer a balanced view, while there was much to commend the French transport sys-

tem as we experienced it, there were also some areas where the group felt that improvements could be made.

These included the cleanliness of carriages, the availability of information on connecting buses (for example, at Nimes there appeared to be no printed timetables on display, which created difficulties for us in establishing how to get to Anduze), and low service frequencies on some lines.

The latter became more of an issue when, as sometimes occurred, there were significant delays or cancellations. Some members of the group were charged extra for using a TGV when their own "classic" service had been cancelled.

Owing to high demand, there were no seats available on the appropriate return TGV service from Avignon TGV to Lille.

We therefore travelled in either sleepers or couchettes on the 23.08 departure from Avignon Centre, which arrived in Lille Flandre two minutes early at 08.12 on Sunday morning. This gave two hours to have breakfast and check in at Lille Europe before boarding the 10.12 Eurostar to Waterloo.

In conclusion, the group enjoyed an excellent week, and moreover, a week that more nearly matched the definition of "green tourism" than one based around car or air travel.

Thanks are due to Trevor Garrod and Peter Cannon for arranging travel and accommodation, and for liaising with our French counterparts prior to our visit, to Chris Butler for interpreting at our meeting with Rail 84 and CGT, to our generous French hosts, and to Jim Walker and Derek Crane for ably leading the group in France.

Next year's trip will be to somewhere German-speaking. Watch these pages for details.

Progress of a kind on reopenings

Many Railfuture members have become increasingly frustrated by the Government and Strategic Rail Authority's failure to make progress on line and station reopenings.

The issue was highlighted by an email enquiry to *Railwatch*. Roger Darlington asked: "It is now 12 years since I bought the book A-Z of Rail Re-openings and I just wondered how the following stations which it said were due for reopening were proceeding: Beeston Castle (Chester-Crewe), Furness Abbey (Barrow-Carnforth), Shap (West Coast main line), Diggle (Manchester) Bolton-le-Sands (Lancaster-

Oxenholme), Walton summit (Preston-Colne), Galgate (Wigan-Preston), Selside (Settle-Carlisle), Totley Brook (Sheffield-Edale), Salterhebble and Luddendenfoot (Bradford-Burnley-Rochdale).

"Any sign of them being reopened in the next 12 years?" *Railwatch* consulted Railfuture reopenings expert Alan Bevan who replied: "Sorry. Not in prospect."

But Alan said the following were in prospect: Gartcosh (North Lanarkshire) 2004, Glasshoughton (West Yorkshire) 2004, East Midlands Parkway (Leicestershire) 2005,

Llanwit Major and Rhoose (Glamorgan) 2005, Coleshill (Warwickshire) 2005, Brackla (South Glamorgan) 2005, Shepherds Bush and Chelsea Harbour (London) 2005, Chatelherault, Merryton, Larkhall and Dawsholm (Strathclyde) 2005, Alloa, Low Moor (West Yorkshire).

Of course, Chandlers Ford station (Hampshire) opened in 2003. In the same year a refurbished ticket office and waiting room opened at Horsforth station (Yorkshire), pictured right. It now has staff and full ticketing facilities for the first time since 1969!

