

A Christmas reminder

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As Christmas approaches and we run on to New Year Junction, may I appeal, suggest, request – whatever verb is most acceptable to branch meeting agenda writers – that every Railfuture branch takes steps to appoint a branch heritage railways liaison member for the 2006 season, and for those members to get to know what makes local heritage lines tick, behind their whistles and steam and smoke screens.

This is particularly significant as we adopt new branch boundaries in the New Year. But I can hear the cry: You must be joking, it's hard enough getting members to do anything as it is.

In my own branch however there is plenty of evidence that members respond enthusiastically if they are asked to undertake achievable tasks they can get their teeth into.

And isn't this a way of attracting new members – the right "jobs" on offer?

Some may say: There are better things to do than running around

after steam train nostalgia merchants. But are there? As I've tried to hint at previously, because we refuse to focus on the real fundamental reasons why we support railways we so often jump to the wrong conclusions about our steamy-eyed neighbours and fail to recognize that, one way or another we have a small, perhaps, but significant railway development gold mine at our feet.

It's not all about some perceived claw-them-all-back-into-the-national-network syndrome either.

The pendulum is never going to swing back to where it was before. The world is rolling on, taking suburban and high speed super trains and, we hope, rural services, community railways, "preserved" railways and us Railfuture people with it.

It's up to us to fight to shape a new railway future against a popular mega-tide that, at this season of the year, sings about Good Will to all Men, but neither means it, nor knows nor cares where it is sweeping us. Irresponsible, starry-eyed words? Think again. Have a good Christmas.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Campaign tips

A list of stations ranked in order of importance by the number of people who use them is now available on the Web.

The top station for passenger numbers is London Bridge which sees 80million passengers go in and out every year. Taking bottom spot at 2,496 is Barry Links with only eight recorded passengers in a year.

These station usage figures allow railway planners to target resources on the most popular stations.

But sadly they may be used to justify cutbacks or even closures. Most rail campaigners have personal knowledge of how statistics have been distorted by rail managers and politicians in the past in an attempt to justify unpopular policies.

These figures were compiled by the Strategic Rail Authority for its *Railways for All* consultation and does not include stations owned by Transport for London.

The SRA admitted: "The calculation of station usage levels does not take into account any changes of train during the course of a journey.

"The ticketing system does not record certain journeys made using TfL bought travelcards, TfL Freedom Passes, staff travel passes and certain other PTE specific products. Care should be taken when using the usage figures for stations within Travelcard zones."

For towns and cities with more than one station – for example Maidstone – the "group station" is credited

with the traffic. What's worse, some train operators are woefully inefficient in keeping ticket offices open and ticket machines in working order.

So the official figures certainly understate the numbers and at neglected stations can be completely wrong and unreliable.

But all rail user groups would be well advised to check the figures for their area and to use the statistics in their publicity and campaigning.

The figures can be found at <http://www.sra.gov.uk/pubs2/statistics>

The list (440kb in Excel format) can be downloaded.

The Bedford to Bletchley Rail Users' Association celebrated its 25th anniversary this year by publishing a 16-page booklet of pictures and the story of its fight for a better rail service.

The association came into existence one year after Mrs Thatcher took power in 1979. The booklet lists the big events along the way, including recalling the fact that there were 3.3 million unemployed people in Britain by 1982.

The start of an electric train service came in 1986 between London St Pancras and Bedford. Network SouthEast was launched by Chris Green in the same year.

In 1990 there was growing optimism that the East-West rail link would bring trains back between Oxford and Cambridge (we are still waiting), but it was followed by the 1993 railway Privatisation Bill.



Safety is paramount on the railway and strict regulations are enforced. But where rail has an interface with road, anarchy reigns – as it does on the rest of the road network.

In an attempt to highlight the dangers, Chorley MP Lindsay Hoyle, pictured right, is supporting a Network Rail safety initiative at Rylands crossing where there have been 22 safety incidents and one death in the past three years.

Also pictured is Gary Openshaw, Network Rail's general manager at Preston. The pedestrian-only crossing on the Manchester-Blackpool line is very valuable for hundreds of people every day but is also the scene of frequent trespass and vandalism.

Sadly on the roads in general, car and lorry drivers know they can get away with almost every law infringement.

Overall incidents of trespass and vandalism have decreased in recent years, Aidan Nelson told a public meeting of the Railway Industry Advisory Committee on 2 November.

However assaults on staff are increasing with around 30% associated with fare evasion.

Overcrowding is the big issue for the public. Michael Woods said the Rail Safety and Standards Board has issued a good practice guide to train operators as a way of improving the way crowds are managed.

Picture: Network Rail

Golden chance for Northampton

A rail reopening campaign began after planners had allowed the trackbed of the Bedford to Northampton line to be blocked by building development at Olney, Bucks.

The Bedfordshire Railway and Transport Association initiated a campaign to seek route protection, study and eventual rebuilding of the direct 18-mile rail link.

The line could form an extension to Thameslink and be a strategic link between the Midland and West Coast main lines.

Since 1997, when BRTA first took action, five studies have been undertaken.

First, the Scott Handley Consultant pre-feasibility study, looked at engineering and usage.

This concluded yes, providing land around Olney and the old trackbed is protected, reopening was still possible and that yes, people would use it in sufficient numbers to make it viable. This study cost BRTA around £3000

with contributions from Railfuture, public donations and fundraising.

Second, the London South Midlands Multi-Modal Study again showed the reopening viable and achievable.

It recommended the line should be part of the Thameslink network, connecting Northampton, with a population of some 200,000 and growing, to places like Bedford, Luton, Luton Airport, London St Pancras (for Eurostar) and Gatwick Airport.

Other studies have all concluded it was a worthy reopening, would enjoy its own market share and would make a valuable contribution to the rest of the network and win new traffic (passenger and freight) to rail.

For more information: www.brta.org.uk or write to the BRTA membership secretary, 115 Kimble Drive, Bedford, MK41 9SZ 01234 300815. BRTA says a warm welcome awaits all who join.