

Open wide for the Grand Way North

By Philip Bisatt

A new era on Britain's railways begins in December with the launch of an open access service from the north east of England to London.

Grand Central Trains will operate three return trains a day from Sunderland and Hartlepool to London from 10 December.

Grand Central - based in York - fought a long battle with GNER to be able to run trains on the East Coast main line where Hull Trains already operates an open-access service.

There has been widespread speculation about the future of GNER which runs most of the inter-city trains on the East Coast main line.

GNER's owner Sea Containers is reported to want to modify its 10-year franchise which was agreed last year and commits it to paying £1.3billion to the Government.

Its main arguments for re-negotiating the deal include the imminent launch of rival operator Grand Central, steeply rising electricity prices, and the impact of terrorism in reducing demand for rail travel to London.

Sea Containers was reported in September to have a £320million "debt mountain". Grand Central by contrast is looking confidently forward and in future would also like to operate direct trains from Bradford to London.

The background to the bid was explained to the Railfuture campaigns conference in Stoke-on-Trent on Saturday 1 July by managing director Ian Yeowart of Grand Central.

Privatisation, Ian suggested, should never have happened - but based on his experience with BR, he feels that Grand Central can do better than the current set-up. Railways were in fact already on the "up" at privatisation. Inconsistency within



- GNER Stations
- Grand Central Stations
- Hull Trains Stations



Government makes it hard for new entrants to the rail industry - hence there have been only two open access operators so far. Operators also need to understand the business.

Grand Central initially approached Railtrack about Open Access paths in 1997 but there were difficulties with rolling stock availability and moderation of competition.

The "Grand Central" name was chosen to reflect Sheffield.

GNER has been strongly opposed to Grand Central's open access proposal for services from London to the Durham coast.

A TransPennine application by GCR was rejected in June 2004. The Rail Regulator had concerns about Grand Central's business model.

The Regulator has a very narrow view of the acceptability of a new service - it must not abstract too much revenue or fail to generate enough. Also, operators can be faced with a Catch 22. They can't meet the growth targets if the necessary infrastructure doesn't exist.

Challenges which Grand Central has had to address include securing the rolling stock. Class 222

Meridians were available at one time but now GCR will have to start operations with InterCity 125s - although new build trains are being discussed.

Track capacity was a subject for argument. Twenty paths a day were identified by GCR on the East Coast main line but Network Rail said they could find only three.

More than £1.5million has been spent so far.

Grand Central made its formal bid for paths on the East Coast main line in February 2005.

The move forced people to think of the financial implications of open access on the East Coast main line.

Christopher Garnett of GNER quoted £165million, although that figure was revised to £114million by the Department for Transport. The latest quoted figure by GNER is £40million. The Strategic Rail Authority report concluded it was £300,000.

The goalposts however keep moving. In 2005, the Strategic Rail Authority strategy proposed no service improvements for the Durham Coast. In 2006 the SRA suggested

there would be benefits from direct services to London from the Durham coast.

In 2005 the SRA objected to train splitting, while in 2006 the DfT proposes train splitting.

Franchised and open access trains pay the same amount for access to the network, but don't necessarily get the same level of access to the network.

For example, Grand Central trains are not being allowed to stop at Peterborough.

Grand Central is looking to develop new markets. It believes that head-to-head competition will bring consumer benefits.

For example, it is going to pick up passengers from points within three, six or nine miles of a station for a fixed fee.

There will be a simple fare structure - single or return. If you can't find a seat you will get a refund.

In response to questions, Ian said local authorities in the North East have been very helpful and supportive. He also said parkway stations are acceptable to a degree but



The Wensleydale Railway

they are not the whole answer. He said the privatised structure has been too heavily prescribed by DfT.

Stoke-on-Trent

Rail campaigners from all over Britain assembled at Staffordshire University for the conference and were welcomed by the Lord Mayor Councillor Jean Edwards.

She told delegates that railways had always had close links with Stoke. They had been crucial to the pottery, steel and coal industries which for many years had formed the economic backbone of the city.

The city council has a good relationship with the railway industry and supports the North Staffordshire Community Rail Partnership.

The modern railway is very important to the city today. The West Coast main line gives fast connections from Stoke to London and Manchester, and there are also regular train services to Crewe and Derby.

Stoke station has been very well modernised within its splendid listed building, and Winton Square is one of the finest gateways to any regional city.

The city council also sees railways as important in helping urban regeneration.

The closure of Etruria station was a setback, although the council worked with the community rail partnership to try to prevent this.

Looking to the future, the council wants to see the Crewe-Derby trains extended to Nottingham in the east and to Manchester Airport in the west. It is also pressing for a restored service at Stone, Barlaston

and Wedgwood stations, which are currently closed.

In the longer term, the council wants significant investment in track capacity to allow more local stations to open, and to expand services at the existing Longton and Longport stations.

Wensleydale

The conference also heard from Ruth Anison of the Wensleydale Railway. She said the Wensleydale Railway does not set out to be "another preserved railway".

The aim is to run "ordinary" trains for use by local people. The successful initiatives on the Settle and Carlisle line are the model - providing road-rail links for walkers and cafes at stations.

The railway can also be a community facility and a provider of skilled jobs.

In Wensleydale, tourism is a big issue. The foot and mouth crisis in 2001 had a serious impact on the rural economy - other sources of income are needed.

There is a need for more tourists, but not their cars!

Best practice in rural railways suggests that 50% of the income has to be derived from sources other than the farebox.

As an example, the Wensleydale Railway has taken over the catering franchise at Northallerton station, which is opposite County Hall.

It has taken 16 years to get so far. The 22 miles of existing line was taken over from Network Rail in 2001. The Wensleydale Railway share offer has raised £2million

since 2000 - which sounds a lot, but it doesn't go very far when you are running a railway.

Providing people with a door-to-door journey is really important. Taintaxi in the Netherlands is a good example and allows people to buy a train ticket which includes onward travel by taxi to their final destinations.

Ruth said people ought never to underestimate the importance of what they can do - and as campaigners, we should note that weight of opinion does count.

Wyvern

Another independent railway was described by George Watson, vice-chairman of Wyvern Rail.

George explained that Wyvern Rail was founded in 1992 with the aim of taking over the Duffield-Wirksworth line. The railway obtained its Light Railway Order in 1996; the plc was formed and a share issue took place in 2002. The railway was an 8.5 mile "linear forest" when taken over. Tracks were



barely visible! The Ecclesbourne Valley Railway Association was formed to provide voluntary support to the railway.

The association has worked hard to develop the potential of the line for tourism, as a community railway, park and ride into Wirksworth and a facility for the local railway industry. The ultimate aim is to provide a 360-day service.

Wyvern has taken advantage of the line's proximity to Derby, arguably now the centre of the UK railway industry. It has made itself available as a testing ground. The line was used to test 18 locomotives in the current Ministry of Defence fleet and will be used for upgraded train control systems for use on London's Jubilee line.

The Wyvern Rail brand has been established, several key industrial customers have been gained, and several long-term testing contracts won. Significant partnerships have been built with the rail industry.

Wyvern Rail has a complete Gatwick Express set with a push-pull class 31, as well as steam locomotives.

In response to a question from the floor, George explained that the connection to the main line at Duffield has been removed.

Signalling has since been renewed which will make it more expensive to restore. Reinstating the down slow line three miles from Derby may be a cheaper option!

■ More news from Stoke on the next page.

■ Don't miss the next Railfuture conference at Reading on 4 November