

South East Northumberland Rail User Group.

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We wish a happy new year to all our readers.

Things have gone a little quiet recently at SENRUG after a hectic autumn, for several reasons, including Christmas, but now should pick up again. Unfortunately there are no new services, stations or lines planned for the north to celebrate this year.

We are now waiting to hear from the Strategic Rail Authority which of the four bidders, First, Virgin, Danish Railways or GNER, has won the Inter City East Coast Main Line franchise. Our submissions to the bidders and their bids are all in now. We hope to have news in a few weeks. Last November several members attended meetings in Newcastle and York with the bidders, usually where the bidders had little to say, but they listened to what various users felt about existing and future services. The only unusual and certainly for me the most interesting presentation came from the small Danish Railways, who appear have a rather different approach to running a railway and perhaps different expectations too.

Our campaign to re-open the Blyth and Tyne line to Ashington, Bedlington Station and Blyth hit a temporary red signal when the Hertfordshire Rail Tours excursion train, which was to run on the line, was cancelled at short notice. This deprived us of a photo-opportunity, political support and press and TV coverage, though we were able to get a little publicity from the cancellation.

On 12th December 2004 Arriva handed over the northern area franchise to Serco-Ned, the Anglo-Dutch company who currently run Liverpool's local trains. The new company is called Northern, and it will run all the local trains in Northumberland. There have been few obvious changes yet, and the Morpeth trains still sport Arriva livery. Northern don't run the Trans-Pennine trains which Arriva lost to First last year, but they have taken over some of First's trains in the Manchester area. This is yet another case of musical railways. So far, no company, however well liked or successful (e.g. Anglia), has won a second term for their existing franchise. Will GNER buck the trend? At present they just seem to swap franchises, e.g. Anglia and Scotrail.

There have been some political moves in the railway world with the publication of the Railway Bill in November. It is very unambitious. It makes no proposals for growth of rail use, nor does it consider the role of rail in reducing air pollution and CO2 emissions and even proposes replacing railways with buses in some circumstances. The bill proposes the scrapping of the SRA, alterations (castration or removal of teeth?) to the Rail Passenger Committee, (the official consumer watchdog), though some alignment of the RPC regions and the new rail franchises is to be welcomed. Generally control will be more centralised when it passes to the Ministry. None of the moves has a very obvious immediate effect on our trains, though we may discover that the changing power structure may have much greater long term significance.

SENRUG is developing its own website, and you will be able to read our newsletters there. Very soon, you will be able to log on to www.senrug.com.uk to find what we are up to. We look forward to your comments, suggestions, contributions, photos, news items, and help with campaigns. We will be asking for your help with a petition and a survey of train users and potential train users.

On a personal note, it is great to be able to contact you again, now my computer and modem are working once more. All my computer problems have made it a very frustrating month.

If you are keen to travel on GNER and probably other trains too, and can book ahead, there are plenty of cheap deals at present, including one from the Evening Chronicle. Also, you could try the almost unknown local rover tickets for the Tyne valley, which permit travel anywhere along the line from Morpeth to Whitehaven.

Ken Allott