

Extended Opening for Morpeth

Northern Rail has announced that the ticket office at Morpeth Railway Station is to open during the afternoon for a trial period of six weeks; plus more news of improvements at Morpeth Station.

SEN RUG HAS long urged Northern Rail to extend the opening hours of the ticket office at Morpeth and welcomes the announcement that—for six weeks from 14th September—the opening hours will be extended until 4.30pm on weekdays. In addition to selling tickets, the office provides access to the station facilities, including the toilet and waiting room; when the office is shut, these are unavailable.

Commenting on the

announcement, SEN RUG chairman Dennis Fancett said: “The ticket office being open means that people will be able to buy tickets for both immediate and advance travel. Any UK rail ticket can be purchased and we have always found the staff very helpful and able to guide passengers through the full range of fares.”

It is hoped that sufficient tickets are purchased during the trial period to warrant the permanent implementation of

the extended opening hours. “We know this was trialled three years ago and was a success back then”, said Dennis. “For some reason action was not taken immediately and now of course the economic situation has changed, so we appreciate that Northern Rail need to conduct the trial again.”

JUST IN time for the extended-opening trial—and following a little prompting from SEN-

» continued, **PAGE 2**

Boost for ABT Campaign

Industry report says “strong business case” for re-opening the line

GEOFF HOON came and went, but rather more excitement was generated by the publication of a report from the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) that listed the Ashington Blyth & Tyne line as one of 14 reopening schemes across England it believes would be good value for money and should be taken forward. Now at last our campaign has formal support from within the rail industry itself.

SEN RUG, Northumberland County Council and the Association of North East Councils have all written to ATOC welcoming the report, and making various points about the detail. ●

HAVE YOUR SAY

Tell us what you think about rail services in South East Northumberland.

» enquiries@senrug.co.uk

» www.senrug.co.uk



PICTURED: Detail of a mural (left) and the refurbished waiting room (right) at Morpeth Railway Station

Network Rail snubs SEN RUG

NETWORK RAIL has shown contempt for SEN RUG by ignoring three letters regarding key infrastructure decisions affecting passengers in the area. The first letter to be ignored was sent in December 2008 expressing concern over the planned parking charges at

Morpeth. This was followed in June by a request for progress on the level-access project at the station. Neither letter solicited a reply or acknowledgement. When the SEN RUG Chairman wrote to Network Rail Chairman Iain Coucher in February—requesting a

re-think of plans to remove infrastructure in Ashington that would be required if services to the town resumed—a swift acknowledgement was received but no further reply.

Perhaps the organisation—which primarily deals with Train Operating Companies—

feels that it is not answerable to ordinary passengers. But whatever the case, it has shown utter contempt to rail users in South East Northumberland. ●

You can find out more about Network Rail on their website at www.networkrail.co.uk.

No High-Speed for North East

Network Rail says no to TGV-like services linking the North East to London and Scotland, leaving the North East's railways stuck in the 1930s.

NETWORK RAIL has announced its preferred route for a new High Speed Line from London to Scotland—and it cuts out the North East. The proposed route would serve the Midlands and the North West, thus denying the North East of a much-needed boost to the economy that would result from faster journey times to London.

As the announcement is not the final decision—indeed, funding for the link still has to be agreed—we can expect City Councillors and Regional Development Agencies to

lobby furiously for a change of mind. But it looks like an uphill struggle.

Although a North East route would not serve any Northumberland stations directly, it would free capacity on the existing East Coast Main Line, creating additional opportunities for regional travel links and connections with high-speed services at Newcastle.

A High Speed Line to the North East would therefore provide Morpeth and other stations in South East Northumberland with a faster, more frequent service. ◆

It's not fare!

Why are cheap fares only available days (or often weeks) in advance, and could National Express's problems be of their own making, asks Dennis Fancett, SENRUG Chairman

MOST PEOPLE accept that its pointless to offer cheap fares on busy peak hour trains, as lower fares are a useful way of directing those with flexibility in their travel arrangements onto less busy trains. But try as I might I can not understand the logic in only offering the cheaper tickets through advance sales. If the train is lightly loaded, why not offer cheap tickets on it right up to when it departs? Having to pay a full fare to travel at the last minute if a

relative is taken ill or there is another emergency is like a tax on misery.

The only explanation I have been able to extract from rail companies is that this is what the low cost airlines do. Yes, and how they are hated for it. So why copy them? Surely the whole advantage of rail is that it is a much simpler, stress free process. This should extend to choosing your ticket too.

Take the 8.55am departure from Morpeth to Aberdeen. This train does not start in

London and is generally fairly empty. The advance purchase fare is a bargain at just £10.70. But book your ticket for the wrong day, or change your plans at the last minute and you will pay £49.50 to travel on exactly the same train—or more likely jump in your car. How can such a difference be justified? Would it not be more sensible to take the average—say £25—and let this be the price regardless of whether you book 3 months or 5 minutes before?

National Express say their financial woes are being caused not by less people travelling (their trains are just as full as ever) but by passengers getting clever and switching from full priced (dare I say, over-priced) anytime fares to the much cheaper advance purchase tickets. A more reasonable, clearer to understand policy such as we suggest above, would have avoided this problem, which seems to be of the rail company's own making. ◆

« Extended Opening for Morpeth, continued from page 1

RUG—Northern Rail has finished redecorating the ticket office at Morpeth Station - and very smart it looks too! Thank you to Northern for a job well done.

STUDENTS FROM Morpeth's King Edward VI School have painted a set of murals at Morpeth Station in association with Northern Rail and the Town Council. The murals,

which can be found in the area leading towards the subway steps on the Southbound platform, provide a welcome distraction from boarded-up windows and considerably improve the appearance of the station. See the photograph on Page 1.

A POSTER display case has been designated for use by SENRUG. Northern Rail has

given SENRUG use of the display area which can be found on the Southbound platform and will be used to display details of campaigns and forthcoming meetings.

In return, SENRUG supporters are asked not to stick up their own notices on the back of the poster cases either at Morpeth or other stations, as unauthorised flyposting

causes Northern Rail to fail quality checks. ◆

Remember that when the ticket office is open, tickets must be purchased before boarding your train.

If you have information that you feel is appropriate to display in SENRUG's poster case, please contact Ronald Hunt on 01670 518055.

PICTURED: A4 Pacific class № 60007 *Sir Nigel Gresley* leaves Newcastle Central with a charter bound for Edinburgh. Classmate *Mallard* set a world speed record of 126mph in 1938, faster than today's inter-city services.



PHOTO: JOHN BRILEY

CrossCountry undercut Northern Rail

CrossCountry's argument to limit stops at Morpeth due to commuter numbers is undermined by their own fare policy.

THOSE WHO attended SENRUG's meeting on 26th March 2009 will recall Richard Gibson saying that CrossCountry did not want to stop more services at Morpeth as they believed their services would be mostly used for local passengers, which they did not wish to encourage. (SENRUG of course disputes this as observations suggest that most people who board or alight from the CrossCountry trains are carrying luggage, and are clearly travelling further than Newcastle. Fare anomalies mean many passengers re-book from Newcastle even though they join or leave the CrossCountry train at Morpeth.)

So given CrossCountry's concern, it is surprising to note they have introduced a new fare of just £2 single (£3 return) between Morpeth and Newcastle, valid on their

trains only. This undercuts the standard off-peak fare of £4.10 single (£5.30 return), which allows travel on any operator's trains (including Northern Rail's trains). The new Arriva CrossCountry fare even undercuts the fare on the local Arriva-operated bus.

SENRUG always welcomes lower fares, though CrossCountry's logic of attracting local commuters onto inter-city trains has to be questioned, given their previous statements. And can such a fare really work given how few CrossCountry trains stop at Morpeth, or will it just cause confusion for passengers who don't notice the restriction?

SENRUG would prefer to have more CrossCountry trains at Morpeth, and to see the operator genuinely supporting the longer distance traveller. ●

The Economies of Rail

ATOC figures show reopening the Ashington, Blyth & Tyne railway line to be good value for money.

THE RECENT Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) report (see "Boost for ABT Campaign, page 1) put the cost of re-opening the Ashington Blyth & Tyne (ABT) line at £34m, just over half of what the former Railtrack suggested it would cost (£59m). Clearly the figure is moving in the right direction!

You might nevertheless think that £34m is still an incredibly high sum, so it is worth comparing this with the cost of schemes designed to help road traffic get to and from Ashington.

£54.5m for A19 Moor Farm Junction Improvements

£37.4m for A19 Seaton Burn Junction Improvements

£36.0m for Morpeth Northern Bypass.

These figures put the ABT price in stark contrast with equivalent road projects and makes reopening the ABT seem rather good value for money. ●

Figures taken from News Post Leader report on 6th August 2009.

Situations Vacant

THE POSITIONS of Treasurer and Membership Secretary both need to be filled as the existing position holders wish to focus on their other roles within SENRUG. Both roles involve basic record-keeping and require email access and spreadsheet experience (Excel). Given that the two jobs both primarily involve dealing with membership records and payments, it is likely that both could be more efficiently filled by one person. Neither job is particularly onerous, requiring only a few hours per month. **SENRUG'S SMALL** exhibition on the Ashington Blyth & Tyne Re-opening Campaign urgently needs to be updated. Some of the text has been overtaken by more recent events, and of course there is now an excellent range of photos of the line in use from the June 2008 charter trip. Is this something you could do? You would need the ability to print digital photos and have some free time to mount displays on backing card. SENRUG would pay for the cost of any materials used. Contact Dennis Fancett (SENRUG Chairman) if you can help. ●

Email enquiries@senrug.co.uk or phone 01670 825500 if you are interested in filling these positions. Any offers of help are most welcome.

Grand Plans for Grand Central

GRAND CENTRAL—AN "open access" operator providing direct services from Sunderland and the Durham Coast to London—has now introduced a fourth service each way (Monday to Saturday). Whilst journey times from Sunderland are about half-an-hour longer than direct National Express East Coast (NEXC) services from Newcastle, Grand Central operates a simple fare structure and the price you pay on the train is the same as the price you would pay in advance. If you have to travel at the last minute or can't find a cheap ticket on NEXC, and don't mind the extra journey time, Grand Central may be your best choice.

Grand Central does not operate a rail franchise, but rather provides services on its own initiative. It plans to start a new service to London from the West Riding of Yorkshire in May. Free wireless internet is provided to all passengers. ●

More information about Grand Central can be found on their website at www.grandcentralrail.co.uk. Tickets can be purchased in advance or on-board.

MP Explains Parliamentary Processes

SENRUG WOULD like to thank Wansbeck MP Dennis Murphy for his excellent talk on his involvement in various committees and groups within Parliament, and how this fits in with the transport-related campaigns that he supports. Despite the inclement weather, a goodly number turned out for the talk—which was part of SENRUG's AGM—and a wide variety of interesting questions were asked of the MP.

Asked how the recession could affect the case for reopening the Ashington, Blyth & Tyne railway line, he commented that it would likely further the case.

Other business dealt with at the AGM included the election of new committee members and reports from the Treasurer and Chairman. ●

Going up in Smoke

The destiny of the Ashington "Black" bridge is revealed as John Earl continues to uncover details of the Ashington, Blyth & Tyne's hidden treasures. John Earl, Membership Secretary

READERS OF our last newsletter will remember that an appeal was made for more information on the two fine viaducts on the Ashington, Blyth & Tyne (ABT) railway line at Ashington and Bedlington. We are grateful to Mrs C.M. Hogg of Ashington, who wrote in to say that she had found a newspaper report of 8th November 1859 referring to the opening of the ABT between Bedlington and North Seaton. Here we find that the "principal work on the line is the viaduct over the Wansbeck, worthy of notice. It is considered to be the largest timber structure of the sort in the Kingdom, being 410 yards in length and 125 feet from the bottom of the pilings. From foundations to the surface of the roadway, no less than 1,200 tons of timber have been used in the construction of the viaduct. The Seghill Railway was extended

in 1846, and on to New Hartley and Blyth in 1847, when it was designated the Blyth, Seghill and Percy Main Railway.

"In spite of having to commission a huge wooden viaduct over the River Blyth, 80 feet high and 770 feet in length, Bedlington Coal Company built a line from a colliery near Bedlington to Newsham. A connection was made in 1850 with the track to Blyth, and passenger trains were introduced a few weeks later. There being an intermediate station at Cowpen Lane, after some years this was renamed Bobside."

Mrs Hogg goes on to say that, from memory, "trains coming into Ashington were greeted by a sign saying 'Ashington and Newbiggin station'. Presumably", she says, "everybody got off, those for Newbiggin home by any transport!" She wonders how New-

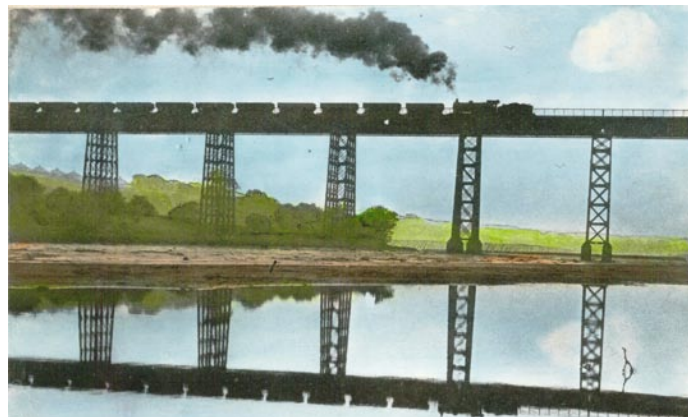


PHOTO: GRAHAM GALBRAITH

PICTURED: A 1950s painting showing a coal train crossing the Black Bridge

biggin folk did get home—was there a shortcut across fields by any right of way? We value these memories of the railway, and perhaps someone else could fill in the gaps. Meanwhile, apparently all that 1,200 tons of timber used on the Ashington Viaduct—the "Black Bridge"—was destined for higher things: it was sold to Swan Vestas or Bryant and

May (we are not sure which) and divided into millions of matchsticks! Now can anyone calculate how many matchsticks it would take to cross the River Wansbeck, and were you one of those privileged to light your pipe with a piece of history? ●

Send your memories of the railway to newsletter@senrug.co.uk.

Franchising: is there a better way?

The government announced in July that it intended to bring the East Coast rail service into public ownership as National Express (who operate the franchise) look unlikely to meet franchise commitments. Whilst many may rejoice at the prospect of a public-owned railway, what can be learned for the franchise model, asks Dennis Fancett, SENRUG Chairman.

IT WAS Lady Bracknell from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* who told the orphaned and hapless Mr Worthing that "to lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." Parallels could easily be drawn with the Inter-City East Coast (ICEC) franchise.

For the government to have one East Coast franchisee (GNER) default on their agreement might have been bad luck, but now that it is happening again with National Express it does rather look as if the franchise model is not working in the best interest of

either taxpayer or passenger.

Why the rush to re-let the franchise a 3rd time? There is surely a strong case now for keeping the ICEC franchise managed by a public company controlled directly by the Department for Transport. At the very least, this would enable genuine comparisons to be made between franchised and directly-managed operations over the length of a typical franchise. This might also see the end of the nonsense whereby East Coast and CrossCountry trains chase each other up the line between York and Edinburgh, but with neither services stop-

ping in Northumberland in many instances.

The government needs to take its time as it considers the future of the ICEC franchise, lest it make the same mistakes again. SENRUG must also take this opportunity to ensure that if the franchise terms are

re-written, they are done so in line with SENRUG's aims and objectives. ●

Should the ICEC franchise stay in the public sector? What would be in the best interest of passengers in the area and nationally? Send your views to enquiries@senrug.co.uk.

What would you like to see in the SENRUG Newsletter? Would like to contribute to the next issue?

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