



▲ Winning students from Hirst Park Middle School with Cllr. Dave Ledger (center) and SENRUG Chair Dennis Fancett (Centre left)

THE Second of November marked the 50th Anniversary of the closure of the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line to passengers, ending 123 years of passenger services on the line. Today, SENRUG, councillors, local MPs and residents campaign for the re-introduction of passenger services.

To commemorate the anniversary, SENRUG invited local schools to produce a short DVD for the case of re-opening the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line to passengers. Five schools entered the competition, all producing superb DVDs that individually made compelling cases for re-introducing passenger services. An awards ceremony was held on the 12th September at Morpeth Town Hall. Chair of The Arch Group Cllr. Dave Ledger announced the winner to a packed hall including the students who produced the film, teachers, parents, local press, representatives from Northumberland County Council and members of the public.

We would like to congratulate the winning school which is Hirst Park Middle School (Ashington). Runners Up (in no particular order) are: Cramlington Learning Village and Collingwood School & Media Arts College (Morpeth).

Local Schools add their Voice to the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne Debate

On the 50th Anniversary of the closure of the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line to passengers, local Schools produce DVDs to outline the case for re-opening.

by Daniel Nesbitt, SENRUG Deputy Chair

Highly Commended entries (in no particular order) are from Northumberland Church of England Academy (Team NCEA), The King Edward VI School (Morpeth) and Northumberland Church of England School (Animation Club).

There was a cash prize of £250 for the winning school and £50 to the two runners-up sponsored by Arch – The Northumberland Development Company. Additionally on the 16th December, SENRUG are taking the winning team to meet their local MP Ian Lavery at Westminster, where he will see their winning DVD. The students will also have a tour of Northern Rail's Control Room at York on the journey. This part of the prize is sponsored by East Coast, CrossCountry and Northern Rail.

All of the entries are available to watch on our YouTube channel: <http://tinyurl.com/klyca8z> ■

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First Transpennine Autumn Stakeholder Update Forum Report

by Daniel Nesbitt



SINCE taking on the role of Deputy Chair, one of my first duties was to attend the First TransPennine Express Autumn Stakeholder Update Forum at Queens Hotel, Leeds back in October. I wasn't sure what to expect at such an event; especially since FTPE is in the somewhat unique situation that it's two parent companies (First Group and Keolis) are bidding separately for the new TransPennine franchise, due to start in 2016. Unfortunately for the speakers, this meant that they couldn't give any ideas each company had for their franchise bids.

The forum kicked off with Nick Donovan, Managing Director of FTPE giving a candid appraisal of the companies current performance. Nick highlighted the overcrowding issues experienced in the Summer Timetable, and teething troubles with their new Electric Multiple Units. Perhaps the companies biggest issue will be the loss of some diesel units to Chiltern in 2015. The company is negotiating with the Department for Transport and other relevant bodies to mitigate this as much as possible, such as hiring other types of stock.

On the positive side of things, Nick talked about FTPEs improved working relationship with Network Rail, especially when dealing with service delays.

Paul Staples, Fleet Director discussed in more detail the issues the company has had with their fleet, such as units being withdrawn for repairs and running units with a faulty engine isolated. FTPE are now working with Siemens to improve the repair regime, which will reduce in-service failures. This, coupled with

modifications for the winter months, means that the company is confident that the fleet is in a much better place ready for the December timetable.

Kathryn O'Brien, Customer Service Director and Steve Lee, Head of Customer Service gave an update on customer service issues. They discussed the steps they are taking to improve their customer service, such as additional training. A more direct improvement they are looking at is the idea of instant compensation for customers in times of disruption and complementary ticket upgrades.

James Nutter was present from Rail North, the partnership formed by the local authorities in the North of England to oversee rail operations in our region. While Rail North is relatively new, it was reassuring to hear that all of the authorities in the partnership (like Northumberland County Council) have an equal voice in the organisation.

The forum concluded with round table discussions from FTPEs management team, which was a useful opportunity for all of the stakeholders to ask questions (It was my opportunity to pipe up about the possibility of extending FTPE's services to Morpeth again!). I was thoroughly impressed with the forum, and the management's candid discussions with the stakeholders was appreciated. ■

SENRUG Win Three National RailFuture Awards

ON November 1st, RailFuture awarded SENRUG two Silver awards for our Website and Newsletter and a special award for our Schools DVD competition. We are honoured and delighted to receive these awards, and we would like to thank the judges and RailFuture for the awards. ■

Join SENRUG

IF you support our work, please join us. The more people we speak for the louder our voice is heard. Annual Rates are £5 individual or couple, £2.50 concession or £10 corporate. Send a cheque payable to SENRUG with your name, full address including postcode and email address (if you have one) to SENRUG Membership Secretary, PO Box 75, Morpeth NE61 2WG. Or to pay by standing order download a Membership Form from www.senrug.co.uk. ■



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Borders Railway Update

by Trevor Watson



Photo credit: Trevor Watson

▲ The new station Shawfair under construction.

FIFTY-SEVEN miles north west of Ashington, as the crow flies, in the Scottish Borders, is the town of Galashiels commanding a population of just over fourteen thousand people. In 1969 Galashiels along with other Border communities lost its rail services, when the Waverley railway line linking Carlisle with Edinburgh was axed. Now after years of campaigning, work is underway on site to rebuild a 30 mile section of the railway, to link Galashiels with Edinburgh. To enable construction, the Waverley Bill was put to the Scottish Parliament in 2004 and passed in 2006. It has taken until now for work to start on the reinstatement, as earlier contractors pulled out the bidding process. Network Rail has now taken back in house the management of the estimated £294 million scheme. Seven new stations are to be provided, starting with Shawfair in the north, near the Edinburgh bypass, followed by Eskbank, Newtongrange, Gorebridge, Stow, Galashiels and terminating at Tweedbank in the south. Tweedbank will have 240 parking spaces and platform provision for 12 coach charter trains.

The new line will be single track, with 3 long passing loops, however there will be provision for future double tracking as well as for electrification, it joins the existing network just south of Newcraighall station, which is situated on the southern outskirts of Edinburgh. The half hourly train service provision is expected to commence in September 2015. The reconstructed railway follows the A7 road, crossing it in several places, necessitating the rebuilding of several bridges. There are also 94 bridges and 2 tunnels being refurbished and associated embankment works. At the north end of the route, sleepers, rail and top ballast were being installed and had reached Gorebridge when I visited the works in late October.

No doubt, this rail restoration will be another Scottish success story and will stimulate regeneration of communities along its length. Previous Scottish rail re-openings such as Stirling to Alloa, Bathgate to Airdrie and Hamilton to Larkhall have all exceeded initial passenger forecast numbers by a substantial amount. In contrast in the North East of England since 1987 we have had only three rail stations re-openings on the Network Rail system, Gateshead Metro Centre, Yarm and very recently James Cook to serve the hospital of the same name on Teesside. I think our politicians need to learn from and implement what is happening to rail travel north of the border. ■

Newcastle Loco Naming Event

by Daniel Nesbitt



EAST COAST trains invited SENUG Deputy Chair Daniel Nesbitt to their formal locomotive naming event at Newcastle on 14th October. The locomotive in question, 91111 was formally named “For the Fallen” to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of World War I, and as well as the railway workers who fought for our country.

Today Tyneside Scottish is an honorary title maintained by 204 (Tyneside Scottish) Battery Royal Artillery, of the 101st (Northumbrian) Regiment Royal Artillery, with service members past and present in attendance for the event.

In what has become a tradition for East Coast, the locomotive was also decorated in eye-catching graphics including period photographs, stories and fitting tributes to those lost during the war. ■

Delightful destinations 6: Charming Macedonia

SENUG committee member Neil Potheary writes about his experiences of the rail system in Macedonia last year.



READERS may recall that in our Newsletter 16 (Summer 2011) I wrote about my very happy experiences of travelling in Montenegro. Last year, I ventured further down the Balkan peninsular, to Macedonia. As with two years previously, I visited in May, when there is plenty of daylight but before the summer heat arrives. People tend to associate former Yugoslavian countries such as Macedonia with the 'Balkan Wars' of the 1990s, however Macedonia departed peacefully following a referendum on 8th September 1991. Everything is quiet nowadays.

Macedonia's capital is Skopje. At home I had previously produced a document with my requests translated into Serbian, in fact I didn't need this as one of the two staff at the ticket office spoke English quite fluently. Armed with my tickets and reservations, I walked the short distance to Hotel Centar, a small and friendly hotel that I have no hesitation in recommending.

For my first day, I explored Skopje, taking many photographs as I wandered around on a delightful spring day. The defining moment in the city's history was at 05:17 on July 26 1963, when a 6.9 Richter-scale earthquake hit, causing massive destruction. More than half of the railway station in use at the time was reduced to rubble, but the surviving section was preserved as a very poignant memorial, the large clock facing the street frozen at that moment in time. My first rail journey was the Macedonian Railways (MZ) train 541 to Bitola, departing 17:10, arrival time 20:00. We headed South west along the Skopje-Greece line.

At Veles, the train branched off southwards, onto the non-electric Bitola line, built 1931-1936. At Bitola, I took a taxi to the small Villa Diamond (my lodgings) as the station is around 1.5 km from the town centre. I spent the following morning exploring Bitola

(Macedonia's second-largest city). Bitola has plenty of lovely old buildings, many of these along the Dragor River which flows through the city centre. Around mid-day, I headed for the station and had a better look around as when I arrived previously, it was after dark. The station has a decidedly French feel as it was built by a French company during the Ottoman era, the tracks nearest to the station are not used as the original route to Thessaloniki shut down in 1984. The platform in use is slightly further away, which is actually good for photography. The Skopje train was no-where in sight at departure time (12:45), however at around 14:00, the reason for the delay became apparent. The incoming train from Skopje arrived, formed of a green MZ class 661 diesel locomotive, three red and yellow compartment carriages, and, rather surprisingly, two hopper wagons at the end.



My sense was that there is not enough freight to justify running freight trains so the MZ attach wagons to the end of passenger trains, a very creative arrangement. Back in Skopje, I prepared for my overnight trip to Belgrade. For this trip, I had a reservation in the couchette car, there was enough spare space for the attendant to give me a compartment to myself (though the train was still well used). This journey followed Corridor X in the opposite direction as with the first part of the Bitola trip. The border with Serbia is not far from Skopje so, once the border formalities were out of the way, there was plenty of time for uninterrupted sleep on the way to Belgrade.

This was a truly lovely trip, all the Macedonians were really pleasant and helpful, and the costs of food, lodging and transport were very reasonable. All three of my journeys on the Macedonian Railways were absolutely delightful, the delay at Bitola wasn't really an issue as there was less time 'piddling around' at Skopje on the return journey. ■



On behalf of SENUG, we wish all our readers a Merry Christmas and a happy new year.

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

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