

Morpeth's Eureka Moment

Urgent but patient lobbying has paid off for Morpeth's East Coast service under the new Eureka timetable, to be introduced on 22nd May 2011.

SENUG MEMBERS will recall the last public draft of East Coast's Eureka timetable was nothing short of a disaster for Morpeth. The morning train to London arrived later, the evening return left earlier, and overall journey times were increased. A similar fate befell the other Northumberland Stations. The county's Rail User Groups, including SENUG, got to work—letters were written, meetings attended and MPs lobbied.

The introduction of the new timetable was postponed from December 2010 to May 2011 as managers at East Coast and their colleagues at Network Rail and the Department for Transport admitted there was still more work to do. There was speculation that East Coast had got the message. A press release of June 2010 stated the needs of Northumberland would be addressed, but no details followed.

Now, just 14 weeks before the implementation date, East Coast has unveiled their



PHOTO: JOHN BRERLEY

PICTURED: East Coast Mk4 DVT no. 82230 thunders through the snow at Cramlington Station.

plans—and it has proved worth the wait. Morpeth is to get its earlier service to London, utilising a suggestion by SENUG and RailFuture to send a Newcastle train north to start its southward journey from Berwick. This train will leave Morpeth at 6.35am and arrive in London at 10.06am. There will be an opportunity for Northumberland passengers to arrive in London at 9.40am by changing at Newcastle on to the faster "Flying Scotsman" service—that's a full hour earlier than is currently possible. Coupled with the ability to leave London at the later time of 6.30pm (plus

7.30pm on Fridays), it means business travellers can spend a full day in London without an overnight stay.

The only loss is the 4.43pm southbound service on Sunday, but with the new opportunity to get to London at a reasonable time on the Monday morning this could be acceptable. Indeed, SENUG had criticised the folly of having both an East Coast and a CrossCountry service depart from Morpeth within 20 minutes of each other, and whilst

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Car Park Progress

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY Council has told SENUG that negotiations are underway with Network Rail to acquire the land on the far side of Coopies Lane required for extending the car park at Morpeth Station. It is hoped to provide around 92 new parking spaces, solving the Coopies Lane parking problems, and encouraging more people to take the train. Potential improvements to the junction with Shields Road are still being considered.

At Cramlington it is proposed to extend the present car park from 48 spaces and 2 disabled spaces, to 102 spaces, 4 disabled spaces and 3 motorcycle spaces, as well as improving the footpath to the northbound platform. Work is planned to start in the spring. ◆

HAVE YOUR SAY!

Send your comments about the Eureka timetable to enquiries@senrug.co.uk.

Morpeth to get Level Access, but at what cost?

MORPETH'S NORTHBOUND platform is to finally receive level access under the DfT "Access For All" scheme, but SENUG has expressed serious concerns about the chosen solution. The plan is to install lifts between the platforms and the subway.

But what happens if the lift breaks down? Network

Rail has assured SENUG that their maintenance contractor guarantees a one-hour response time. However, with so few inter-city trains calling at the station, that could leave passengers stranded for hours until the next service.

One SENUG member reports that at Staplehurst in Kent, the lifts are routinely

locked out of service when the station is unstaffed. And when SENUG Chairman Dennis Fancett visited Orpington, a busy commuter station in south east London, he found the lifts—also under a one-hour response contract—had been out of service for over a week (hopefully with no one inside!).

With SENUG's preferred solution—a footpath from the northbound platform to Bankside/Station Cottages—being so easy to construct, it is difficult not to think that the current plan is rather short-sighted, and that perhaps the council will end up having to fund a non-mechanical solution at a later date. ◆

Winter Weather travel chaos: rail fares best

All forms of transport—road, rail, air and sea—suffered major disruptions as a result of unprecedented winter conditions. But anecdotal evidence suggests that the region's roads suffered worse than its rail links.

THE WORST rail problems on the East Coast route were caused by a broken-down train at Dunbar and overhead power line failure south of Peterborough. However, SENRUG Chairman Dennis Fancett noticed that the A1 and A697 routes to Scotland closed rather more frequently than the equivalent rail route. SENRUG would like to thank everyone who worked hard to keep transport links open despite the snow.

But whilst disruption is understandable during such appalling weather, the lack of customer information is not. East Coast's website completely abandoned any attempt to inform passengers which services would be running, advising instead to visit the National Rail website for its emergency timetable. Here you were immediately taken to a timetable page, but it was not clear this was only the standard timetable.

East Coast's emergency timetable was accessed through an obscure link at the bottom of the page. Why can't East Coast put its own timetable on its own website? This was raised with East Coast MD Karen Boswell, but only an acknowledgement of the email has been received.

MEANWHILE, NORTHERN Rail is looking for good-spirited volunteers who are willing to help grit platforms at local stations in any repeat of such

conditions. They are only too aware their contractors failed to make it to several of their stations due to road traffic disruption. Full training and insurance cover would be provided and you would not be expected—or indeed permitted—to do anything that is unsafe. ●

If you would like to volunteer gritting platforms, send your contact details to enquiries@senrug.co.uk and we will forward them to Northern Rail.

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details of CrossCountry times have not been announced at the time of press, if a CrossCountry service remains at around the same time (currently 5.02pm), journeys to London will still be possible by changing at Newcastle or York. There are new Sunday

evening journey possibilities to Morpeth from London.

The change in fortunes for our rail services demonstrates the value of groups such as SENRUG. Thanks go to all those involved in the lobbying campaign, and to those in the rail industry for listening.

East Coast has also announced improvements to their first class service—such as complimentary at-seat meals—from May 2011. ●

The "Eureka" timetable is due to come into effect in May 2011. More details can be found at www.eastcoast.co.uk/22may.



Details of the new CrossCountry and Northern Rail timetables should be released shortly.

Privatisation's Silver Lining

The Major government's flawed model for rail privatisation may actually be beneficial amid the current government's spending cuts, argues Dennis Fancett, SENRUG Chairman

TRANSPORT JOURNALISTS and commentators are generally united in the view that spending on rail did not suffer as much as other public services—or indeed as badly as had been feared—in the recent government cutbacks. Many rail investment programmes are to continue.

The franchising regime, introduced by John Major's government, and generally accepted by all as being sub-optimal, means that today's coalition government found it and its arms-length subsidiary Network Rail had made contractual commitments to the private train operating companies to deliver various

improvements, and it would be very expensive to renege on these commitments.

This was, in fact, one of the planned consequences of the privatisation that investment in rail could be fixed over the long term and not subject to the vagaries of changes in the public spending policy of the day.

The Major Government's other dream was that "open access" operators would emerge and flourish to serve parts of the network not included in the franchise specifications. But for years the only open access operator was Hull Trains, serving the constituency of the then

Transport Minister John Prescott. But in recent years Network Rail has been forced to concede that the rail network has capacity for more trains to run and we have seen a flurry of new open access operators emerge. Nearest to us is Grand Central who connects Sunderland and the Durham Coast directly to London, with a recently-commenced second route from London to Yorkshire, and plans for a Blackpool service recently announced. Who knows—perhaps an extension of the London to Sunderland service through to Ashington via Northumberland Park could be considered next? ●

WITH THE prospect of budget cuts in many areas of public life, how does South East Northumberland's rail investment fare?

Still planned:

- » Level access schemes at Morpeth and Alnmouth
- » Customer Information Screens (CIS) at Morpeth
- » Car park extensions at Morpeth and Cramlington

Axed:

- » Extended Opening Hours for Morpeth Ticket Office

Uncertain:

- » CIS at Cramlington

The Mineral Line

SENRUG Committee Member Andrew Carmichael has been keeping up to date with developments on the Ashington to Butterwell line, which shows some serious potential.

THE ASHINGTON to Butterwell mineral line leaves the Ashington Blyth & Tyne (ABT) line at Ashington and travels north past Linton and the Butterwell Disposal Point to re-join the East Coast Main Line (ECML) south of Widdrington.

This single track line has never been part of the National Rail network but is privately owned by the freight operator. Despite opposition from SENRUG, its connection to the rail network at Ashington was recently cut, with about 10 feet of track lifted. SENRUG suggested it should be retained to allow potential passenger services to reverse at Ashington.

But with the start of new opencast operations in the Linton area, the line has actually been brought back into use, with all freight traffic needing to route via Ulgham to return to the rail network.

SENRUG therefore believes the line has scope to carry passenger trains between Widdrington and Newcastle. Would the opencast operator be prepared to return the line to the community once coal extraction operations have ceased?

There is a technical problem at the Ulgham end of the line where it takes on a 180 degree loop and joins the ECML running south. To be used as extra capacity as suggested it would need to join the ECML running north. Unfortunately there is a vertical separation and a new inclined embankment would need to be constructed. This of course would require heavy earth moving equipment, which is exactly what the opencast operator has on site.

Would such a line ever be needed? A huge new devel-

opment of housing and leisure activities—known as Blue Sky—is being planned north of Widdrington Station. SENRUG understands a major stumbling block for the development is the current lack of public transport infrastructure. Additionally, colleagues in the Aln Valley Railway Society are pressing on with their plans to reinstate the railway between Alnmouth and Alnwick. Both these initiatives would require more trains between Newcastle and Alnmouth, and there is also SENRUG's aspiration for a regular local service between Newcastle and Berwick, calling at all stations—including Beal and Belford, which are currently closed.

The problem with additional local trains on the ECML is that the fast inter-city services need to overtake them. But if some local trains were diverted at Ulgham to run to Newcastle via Linton, Ashington and Northumberland Park, this would solve the problem. At the very least, SENRUG believes the line should be earmarked for possible introduction to the passenger network once opencast operations finish, to prevent it from being built on. And if of course the line were to be used for passenger services, there would be little to stop new stations being created for communities such as Linton. ◆



PICTURED: A sunny scene at Barrow station on the Cumbrian Coast line.

Local Transport Plans

DURING 2010, local authorities across the country were required to update their Local Transport Plans (LTPs). SENRUG was invited to consultation events by both Northumberland and for the combined Tyne & Wear area LTP. Brief input was made to the Tyne & Wear LTP, stating that the needs of people travelling to Newcastle from outside their area—and also that the needs of people travelling through Newcastle, using it as an interchange, but neither starting nor finishing their journeys in Tyne & Wear—needed to be considered. We were pleased to note Northumberland's draft plan already highlighted the Ashington to Newcastle corridor as their top public transport priority (paving the way for subsequent commitment to re-opening the Ashington Blyth & Tyne line) so apart from the verbal commitments we made on the day itself, SENRUG did not make any further written input. Separately, however, response was made to Northumberland's car park charges consultation, saying that SENRUG believed the Council had failed to take into account the special characteristics of car parks at railway stations. ◆

Around the Cumbrian Coast from Morpeth

SENRUG Secretary John Earl and member David Hilton take us on a jaunt along the Cumbrian Coast from the unlikely starting point of Morpeth.

BELIEVE IT or not, this trip is possible in just a day, though it would be more convenient if the immutable Law of the Universe which states that "all trains to Morpeth must disappear between 6.30 and 8.30pm" did not exist. Given that the infamous Black Hole does exist, however, we were no worse off than many a weary Morpethian who has chased all the way up the country at a cracking pace only to find that they have just missed the 6.30pm service and must resign themselves to their finding dinner has once again been fed to the dog.

The best idea is to pick a good day (as we did), work out the trains so that you land on a good station in time for some decent refreshment (which we also did), and take the day in the spirit of a "railway ramble" (three out of three except for the bit from Lancaster to Carlisle which was a bit busier, but this was not unexpected).

As you will see, timings allowed us to sample the delights of the wonderful Gothic refreshment rooms at Carlisle, as well as the posh new café at Barrow, where we even had time for a bit of a wander. Time for tea at Lancaster, and then if we had been organised enough, a slap-up dinner in the hotel by Newcastle Central Station; we weren't, but it would have rounded off a good day out and got away from the "kicking-your-heels-in-Central-Station" scenario mentioned above.

Highlights of the trip were the views of the Solway Firth,

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Are we being served?

By Dennis Fancett, SENRUG Chairman

THERE CAN be no doubt that Northern Rail, who currently operates the service from Newcastle to Cramlington and Morpeth, are an excellent company to work with as they invest a considerable amount of energy into stakeholder relations—i.e. finding out the views of groups such as SENRUG and passengers.

But, with the Northern franchise coming up for renewal in 2013, it is important to be asking whether the interests of South East Northumberland are best served by including the route within the Northern franchise (regardless of who may be running it in future). The line sits rather clumsily on the perimeter of the franchise area with most journeys serving just two stations—Cramlington and Morpeth. It may therefore not get the management attention it deserves.

The other contender to take on the route would be the Transpenine Express franchise, currently operated by First TransPennine Express (FTPE). FTPE trains currently run from Manchester Airport to Newcastle Central, but on arrival at Newcastle wait 50 minutes before commencing the return journey. During that time they could easily run to Cramlington and Morpeth, freeing up valuable platform space at Newcastle.

First Group, one of the stakeholders of FTPE, also currently operates the separate Scotrail franchise north of the border. They are currently examining—in conjunction with Transport Scotland—the feasibility of a regular Edinburgh to Newcastle service.

There can of course be no guarantee First Group would keep either of the aforementioned franchises when they are next renewed, but if in fact they did, operating the Northumberland service might

give them greater synergies and provide a stronger business case for a regular service through Northumberland that would link their two franchises together.

What then are the relative merits for South East Northumberland?

ADVANTAGES:

- » Through journey opportunities from Cramlington and Morpeth to Durham, York, and Manchester Airport.
- » Service runs much later into the evening and on Sundays too.
- » Modern, more comfortable rolling stock with a trolley service.
- » Rolling stock owned by the new Northern franchise holder previously used for the Morpeth service could be diverted and used for a new Newcastle to Ashington service via the ABT.

DISADVANTAGES:

- » No through journeys to the MetroCentre.
- » Trains would be subject to delays caused by operational difficulties as far away as Manchester or Liverpool.
- » What would happen to the once daily north of Morpeth service to Chathill?

The DfT normally invites local authorities and stakeholder groups to comment on draft franchise specifications before the bidding process starts. However, because different franchises come up for renewal at different times, there is not an easy method to suggest or indeed implement changes to a particular line from one franchise to another. ●

What do you think? Would you be for or against such a proposal? Send your views to enquiries@senrug.co.uk.

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the cliffs of St Bees, the spectacular views of the headlands at Whitehaven and the Lake District fells at Ravenglass and Foxfield as well as the full sweep of the Duddon Estuary and the Morecambe Sands, beautifully blue and ethereal on the day we chose; if you are into industrial archaeology the list is endless, but highlights for us were the beautiful little station at Aspatria and the temporary—but now dismantled—station built for flood relief at Workington North, as well as the numberless sidings and old railway and harbour buildings which tell of the glories of West Cumbria's industrial past.

At Workington, a massive empty space in front of the harbour is all that remains of the ironworks which contained the oldest Bessemer Converter in the country and produced rails for the whole country until only a couple of years ago.

Sadly the Cumbrian Coast Line does not have a guidebook, unlike some of the more famous routes through Scotland. However, it is our belief that this route is at least as spectacular if not more so; try waiting for the signal before the tunnel outside Whitehaven with the sea thrashing on the desolate shore feet below you and a sheer black cliff on your other side! Hopefully the Tourist Boards will wake up to the potential of this route and provide something to attract more people to this wild and

scenic journey. And don't forget, if a day's walk is all you need, the train opens up many possibilities, from a riverside stroll at Wetheral or Dalston, to a cross-country epic from St Bees or Ravenglass.

The whole thing took 13 hours, but there was so much of interest and so many fantastic views that it certainly did not seem that long. Inexpensive too—using the "Cumbrian Rover" ticket (starts from Haltwhistle) and a Senior Railcard, the cost was only £20 when we did the trip last May.

- » 7.49am Morpeth to Newcastle (arr. 8.14am)
- » 8.24am Newcastle to Carlisle (arr. 9.56am)
- » 10.43am Carlisle to Barrow-in-Furness (arr. 1.16pm)
- » 2.16pm Barrow-in-Furness to Lancaster (arr. 3.20pm)
- » 4.08pm Lancaster to Carlisle (arr. 5.00pm)
- » 5.20pm Carlisle to Newcastle (arr. 6.56pm)
- » 8.29pm Newcastle to Morpeth (arr. 8.43pm)

It is not necessary—or indeed possible—to reserve seats for most of the trip. We found it very quiet all the way around except Lancaster to Carlisle, but even then on the main West Coast route we found seats. We could not imagine it ever being overcrowded, even on a Saturday.

Not to mention of course, the possibility of going the obvious way round Cumbria: clockwise. Now why didn't we think of that? ●

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

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