

REPORTS BY CHAIRMAN, MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY, COMMITTEES AND SUB COMMITTEES**CHAIRMAN****Mike Crowhurst**

I began last year's Report by referring to the departure of Admin Officer John Lee and Treasurer Tony Sheward. Finding permanent replacements for both has taken far longer than expected. After a false start last year we do finally have a new Treasurer in post - Bob Imrie from Collingham (Notts). At the time of writing it looks as if most of John Lee's tasks will now be taken on by Lloyd Butler from Ipswich, although some external admin support will also be retained. Having relied on someone like John Lee for six years, one only discovers how indispensable he was when he has gone! Hopefully by the time we come to the AGM, these arrangements will have had time to bed in, freeing Membership officer David Harby (who has held the fort on both fronts at times, and for whose support I am deeply grateful) to concentrate on his main job again after having been largely responsible for turning our finances round as acting Treasurer. The Sales Officer post however still remains to be filled.

Another advance during the year was the full implementation of the new branch structure in the East Midlands, which has been almost universally welcomed and is already paving the way for more effective campaigning in that area.

Our programme of meetings during the year featured an AGM at the GW Steam Museum in Swindon on a fine spring day in May, followed by a partly residential Campaigning Conference at Staffordshire University, Stoke on Trent, over a sweltering hot weekend in July, and in the autumn a very well attended User Groups Conference in Reading. The Campaigning conference weekend in particular was very much a new venture, and all credit for its success goes to Vice-chairman Jerry Alderson. The autumn conference also saw the experimental revival of the workshop system, but the star attraction was Conservative Rail spokesman Stephen Hammond, who demonstrated some refreshingly new thinking on transport in his party. Mention should also be made of the now annual Community Railfest organised by ACoRP, which took place this year over a September weekend in Darlington and Shildon. Thanks are due to Gordon Barclay and other NE Branch members, and to Chris Precey, for covering this event this year.

Once again the year has produced a veritable deluge of consultation documents on franchising, route utilisation strategies, "scoping studies", stakeholder meetings and much else, to keep key members busy at all levels. For the first time we were invited to attend a Select Committee Inquiry on Franchising. The year began with a rather depressingly titled and poorly argued document "Consultation on the implementation of Railways Act 2005 provisions on closures & minor modifications" (see PLC report). The standard of RUSs emerging from Network Rail have generally been more positive than those from the SRA, but the government - or more precisely "DfT Rail" (not so much shadow SRA as ghost of SRA!) seem determined not to learn the lessons of the Greater Western franchising fiasco if the specification for the latest batch, notably Cross Country, is anything to go by.

Encouraged by our meeting with minister Derek Twigg in December 2005, we approached the DfT in the summer for the promised follow-up meeting. No sooner was a date fixed (in September) than the minister was replaced by a new man, Tom Harris, so our ambition to get to see the same minister twice remains unfulfilled! The meeting nevertheless went ahead as planned, but turned out to be rather disappointing and curtailed to half the expected time. A meeting with ATOC proved rather more rewarding, lasting almost three hours, and although we agreed to differ on some points, we were listened to carefully on a wide range of issues and had a very useful dialogue. We also maintain an ongoing series of meetings with Passenger Focus and regular contacts have been established with opposition party transport spokespersons (again, see PLC report for details).

Whilst the campaigning environment remains a difficult one, there have been some encouraging signs during the year that the political climate is beginning to change, as issues of global warming and sustainability are forcing themselves further up the public agenda, and this has to be to our advantage in the long term. Publication of the government's Strategic Plan for the Railways, a.k.a. "High Level Output Statement" (expected in summer 2007) will be the acid test. We must seize this opportunity and not allow ourselves to be distracted by internal problems.

MEMBERSHIP**David Harby**

Membership at the end of 2006 was 2541 with 134 family members counted as two, compared to 2005 where the figure stood at 2780. Members inevitably fall by the wayside, mainly due to age and infirmity, financial circumstances or simply moving house without giving us a forwarding address. We are recruiting new members but not enough to replace those we are losing.

The times when membership has increased substantially have always been when passengers have perceived that their services are under threat. We can as campaigners see that cutbacks and overcrowding are not far over the horizon. Indeed, members in the First Great Western area would probably say they are with us already. It is up to all of us as individual members to ensure that rail users know of these threats and to encourage them to join us.

Tried and tested sources of new members, such as leaflets in magazines, are nowhere near as successful as they used to be, so we need to channel our efforts elsewhere. Websites are now our most fruitful source of new members but we cannot rely on these alone. The next best recruitment method is something that has always been with us - personal contact by existing members. Members of one of our smaller branches have been particularly successful at this in 2006 with nine new recruits. If all other branches had followed their example we would now have 125 more members.

I would like to thank those branch membership and other officers who have been proactive and helpful to me in 2006.

RAILWATCH**Ray King**

Three issues of Railwatch - with eight pages of colour in each issue - were produced in 2006 and one in the early part of 2007. Thanks to all our contributors.

We have held production costs steady throughout 2006 although Print-Out did increase the printing bill by £25 for RW109 (October 2006). We do not yet have the bill for RW110 (January 2007).

In 2006, the editorial board included Jerry Alderson, Lloyd Butler, Alan Cocker, John Barfield, Laurence Fryer, Ray King, Graham Morrison, Robert Stevens and Michael Weinberg. It is also helped by Railondon and email discussion group editor John Davison. At the end of 2006, at the age of 70, Michael resigned from the board. *railfuture* members owe him a tremendous debt for all the effort he has put into Railwatch over the years. He hopes to contribute articles in future.

Distribution was switched in 2005 from volunteers to a professional firm, Mailhandlers. They have provided excellent service throughout 2006.

Several hundred copies of Railwatch continue to be sent to MPs, peers, rail passenger committees, rail-orientated companies, local authorities and the media, as part of our campaign to keep opinion-formers properly informed on rail issues. The list of those who receive Railwatch free is maintained by David Harby.

The editorial board meets four times a year in London.

FREIGHT SERVICE & DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**Gary Tinsey**

We have met on four occasions, divided equally between Birmingham and Peterborough. Our agenda business has been varied, including discussion and, wherever practicable, action on the following issues: market growth, new leads and potential freight flows, infrastructure upgrades, access charges and land use and planning; while detailed submissions have been compiled in response to The Department for Transport, Ports Policy review and The Network Rail Freight Route Utilisation Study consultation papers.

Furthermore correspondence has been recorded on the continuation of rail freight through The Channel Tunnel, developments at Liverpool and Hull docks, The Port of Tyne and a new railhead facility, commissioned at Blyth, to handle imported coal.

Close association with the Rail Freight Group (RFG) and all internal committee bodies has been maintained. In addition we have established a good working relationship with the Freight on Rail lobby group.

It is pleasing to note our attendance at two conferences organised by RFG, where our delegate gained useful information on the industry's concerns and aspirations on a number of key issues.

Other members have undertaken a tour of The Port of Southampton and another participated in a Transport 2000 manifesto 'Growing the Railways in Yorkshire and the Humber Region' event, held in Leeds.

To encourage attendance at meetings and facilitate our debate, a guest speaker was invited to attend our December gathering. Those present welcomed the change in format and were interested in the subject title 'Rail freight in Norfolk since 1990 - a review.' Subsequently the speaker has applied to join our committee.

Thanks go to all panel members and corresponding activists for their voluntary efforts throughout the year and commitment towards the new campaign agenda.

The committee will provide guidance on rail freight and associated issues when requested and, in doing so, promote the social, economic and environmental benefit of integrating rail within a commodities or product supply chain.

POLICY LOBBY AND CAMPAIGNS COMMITTEE & TRANSPORT ACTIVISTS ROUNDTABLES**Norman Bradbury**

By the year end, Norman Bradbury will have represented Railfuture at seven Core TAR, two Regional TAR, two Transport Taxation Group and six All-Party Parliamentary Climate Change Group meetings, mostly at the House of Commons. Written reports on these meetings are circulated to PLC members and others as appropriate.

Two lobby meetings have been held. Keith Dyall and Norman Bradbury met Chris Grayling, Shadow Transport Secretary, and Stephen Hammond, Shadow rail minister, on 8th June. Mike Crowhurst, Howard Thomas, Martin Murphy and Norman Bradbury met Tom Harris, Parliamentary Under Secretary for Transport, on 10th October. Notes of both meetings have been circulated (copies from Norman Bradbury). It is intended to seek further such meetings, including with the LibDems, in the New Year.

The Committee has also responded at length to the DfT Consultation on the Railways Act 2005 Provisions on Closures & Minor Modifications. The DfT have addressed some of the concerns raised but many others remain and lobbying on these issues will continue. Among other issues of great concern to the committee are the DfT's new franchising specifications, especially for Cross Country services, which involves cuts to all services connecting the South West and South Coast to points north and west of Manchester.

NETWORK DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**Jerry Alderson**

The Network Development Committee met three times in 2006 with much work being done outside the meetings.

The new version of the A-Z of Reopenings is progressing well, with the historical openings brought up-to-date and most branches providing feedback on proposed schemes. Nick Lewis is co-ordinating the photographic content, and he would appreciate photos of new and reopened stations that show the railway in a good light.

We intend to issue a paper on electrification in early 2007. The draft paper has been reviewed and is being revised to incorporate more factual evidence.

I represented the committee at the Holdfast Rubber Highway demonstration in Corby on 1st June. However, we felt the idea had not been properly thought through and do not believe it is a practicable way of reopening railway lines for rail-based vehicles.

We were asked to progress three motions from the AGM and duly wrote to the relevant organisations. We have also made objections to planning applications that would breach trackbeds, such as Keswick-Penrith. Along with many campaigners we wrote to Ruth Kelly to protest against the approval given to build a rowing lake along the former Bedford-Sandy alignment.

The *railfuture* Business Plan proposed documenting our national policies to aid campaigners and we have contributed four policy papers: Role of Light Rail, High Speed Lines, Station and Line Reopenings and Electrification.

Our highlight was, perhaps, the very successful and ambitious Campaigners' Conference in Stoke-on-Trent on 1st July, which the committee took responsibility for.

The committee manages Fighting Fund applications that relate to network enhancements, such as new stations, and we hope to see more applications in 2007. We would expect the applicant group to have a stable history and provide substantial documentation to justify their financial request. Applications are more likely to be successful if from *railfuture* branches or affiliated organisations, especially if they have not received an award in recent years.

INTERNATIONAL & EU COMMITTEE

Andrew MacFarlane

The International & EU Committee met three times in 2006, in Derby, London and again in Derby. There was concern during the year over the future of the Harwich-Hook of Holland ferry service, on which passenger loadings have been affected by cheap air fares. The HSS (high speed ship) has been withdrawn from the route but we are pleased that conventional sailings will still be provided. We remain concerned by moves to bar foot passengers from many cross-Channel ferry services, particularly at night, and we will continue to lobby on this issue.

We continued our close liaison with the European Passengers' Federation (EPF) and there was co-operation on a report into cross-border rail services in the EU, on which EPF has now taken the lead role. The committee now has a mention on the *railfuture* website. We continue to press for the improvement of through booking from the UK to the Continent, in particular by lobbying ATOC.

A major issue, which surfaced towards the end of the year, was the threatened withdrawal of most Eurostar calls at Ashford in favour of Ebbsfleet. The committee takes the view that Ebbsfleet is not a satisfactory substitute for Ashford due to its poor links with the national rail network and we issued a press release on the subject. The effect of this change coupled with the transfer of Eurostar services from Waterloo to St Pancras could well be that some existing users of Eurostar will instead drive to Gatwick Airport. Eurostar should of course also gain passengers by virtue of the faster journey times from St Pancras to both Paris and Brussels, but why inconvenience existing users? We continue to lobby for some Eurostar services to call at Stratford for connections with services from East Anglia. In 2007 we will be producing a report on rail links to UK airports.

PASSENGER COMMITTEE

Howard Thomas

Much of the work of the Passenger Committee during the year has been to monitor the threats to passenger services in different parts of the country arising from fares, fare increases, franchising, rail utilization studies, rail closures and micro-management of the railway by the DfT. 2006 saw the DfT become involved in timetabling and threatening considerable reductions in services in the west of England. 2006 also saw the publication of the House of Commons Transport Committee's (HCTC) reports on fares and franchising. Just before Christmas came the Eddington Report.

The HCTC Report on fares was in some ways damning, arguing that the £87 million per week subsidy placed an 'obligation on those who manage the railway to run it as a public service (Para 148)'. It went on to say that 'neither passengers nor tax-payers get value for money' (Para 149) and to argue that Government has 'failed to honour its obligation to passengers and tax-payers alike to ensure that the railways are affordable and user-friendly' (Para 150). The Committee was astonished that the Government had 'accepted all too readily a privatized railway which has put revenue and profit before passengers over the past decade' (Para 151). Not surprisingly, the Government does not agree that the current fares system offers poor value-for-money, nor does it accept that operators focus on revenue and profit to the detriment of passengers.

The HCTC Report on franchising was similarly damning, arguing that the system was not delivering the level of rail passenger services needed. The decision to remove GNER from its role as a franchise holder shows up the fundamental weakness of a system that takes the highest bid, but that does not necessarily deliver in return the best, or most affordable, service to the public. The Committee awaits with interest the Government's response to this report.

During the year, meetings involving members of the passenger committee took place with ATOC, the Minister for Rail (who disagreed that DfT was micro-managing the railway), and Passenger Focus. These meetings covered most of the issues mentioned above. However, those attending the meetings were not reassured that ATOC or the Government was listening to users' concerns. The playing field is still not level. Proposed improvements to rail are too easily dismissed as just another railway project by an unwilling Government, and fare rises above inflation, often twice per year, seem to go on relentlessly.

We will continue in 2007 to pursue the issues of fares, franchising, rail utilization studies, rail closures, micro-management of the railway by DfT and the national impact on rail of the coming Olympics. Let us again remind ourselves that it is Parliament, Government and their officials who let us have the railways we now have.

OFFICER FOR DISABLED TRAVELLERS

Clara Zilahi

Overall there has been a vast improvement since the first Disability Discrimination Act (1995), with better facilities at stations and on trains, and greater disability awareness of staff. Hence many more people with various disabilities use trains, even unaccompanied. When something goes wrong, such as booked help not turning up, or insensitive treatment, there are grounds for complaint and an occasional rail user may be put off using trains again. Hence the need for continued vigilance, and good avenues for complaints, of which *railfuture* is one.

There is however some lack of joined-up thinking. The exemption from accessibility requirements hitherto applying to rail vehicles has come to an end, which could logically lead to still useful units being scrapped because in some detail they fail to meet the regulations. This would be disastrous as we need more, not fewer, units to reduce overcrowding. In the case of inaccessible stations, the 'provision of alternative services' ie a taxi to the nearest accessible station, still applies. The current pressure to abolish remaining barrow crossings raises fears that alternatives available such as road crossings and some footbridges could reduce accessibility.

The DfT has allowed additional funds under the "Access for All" scheme, bringing the number of stations to be improved to 92, the work to be completed by 2011. In addition £2.5m is to be spent on smaller improvements at over 300 stations.

The irony is that disabled people (especially wheelchair users) could in practice access many 'inaccessible' stations and trains if staff were available to help. Thus driver-only operated trains cannot be accessed at unstaffed stations (even if the platform is accessible) because they do not carry ramps and there are no arrangements for on-train staff to help.

Another anomaly is that accessibility regulations are supposed to apply also to replacement bus services (except in the case of heritage or charter services) while we all know that replacement buses can be difficult to find in an emergency and many of these are coaches with extra high step access.

A perennial problem has been the transport of powered scooters, which were banned by many TOCs. It is now becoming clear, according to a 2002 SRA Code of Practice (since adopted by the DfT) that powered scooters coming within the specifications laid down for wheelchairs (not exceeding a height of 1350mm, a width of 700mm and length of 1200mm) should be allowed (unless a particular train unit makes this physically impossible).

My work involves replying to and passing on individual complaints related to occasional failure and lack of facilities at certain stations. In some cases all the help I can give is to explain the current position and perhaps advise that individual complainants should enlist the help of a local disability group. A concerted campaign providing evidence of actual need may be able to put a better case for, eg moving a particular station up the scale of priority for improvement. It is important that any complaints sent to me should give specific details. For instance, complaints about refusal to carry a powered scooter (or wheelchair) should detail the actual measurement. If, as has happened, a victim passes her problem to me via a distressed phone call, but does not reply to my request for this vital information, there is nothing further I can do. Similarly, if the complaint concerns failure of booked help, it is important to give details of the actual train involved.

Consultation documents seem plentiful and if they come my way in time I do my best to respond on behalf of *railfuture*. Last year DIPTAC produced one concerning their strategy for 2007-2010. It seemed to contain little except platitudes about the right of disabled people for good access, questions regarding suitable formats, alternative languages, etc for the document. In my response I suggested, with examples, that those reading it were more interested in practical answers to actual problems.

CYCLING SUB-GROUP

Chris Hyomes

2006 was spent developing the contacts made within the TOCs. During December a very positive meeting was held with Transpennine Express.

While it is proving very difficult to get more cycle space on trains, the TOCs appear keen to provide safe and secure cycle parking for bikes at stations. Let's see what 2007 brings.

We are also making and developing contacts with local councils and several of the community rail partnerships. Northern Rail's cycle users forum continues to meet - at the last meeting their cycling policy was finalised and will be launched in spring 2007.

Both First Group and Arriva have asked for input from the group regarding the new Cross Country and East Midlands rail franchises. As I write this report the ECML franchise held by GNER is under consultation. The group has made a submission based on the standards already set by GNER.

HOW MEMBERS CAN HELP RAILFUTURE

Nearly all *railfuture* campaigning is funded by our members. As well as making a donation with your subscription there are other ways of helping Railfuture.

Can you recruit a new member? Membership leaflets can be downloaded from the www.railfuture.org.uk web-site ("Join Us") or by contacting the Membership Secretary, 6 Carral Close, Brant Road, Lincoln LN5 9BD.

Please consider some of the ideas suggested in the "Time for Action" section in each edition of Railwatch.

Why not volunteer to take an active role in National and local branch activities?

Try to attend one of *railfuture*'s national events. **The AGM will be held at STEAM in Swindon on Saturday 6th May 2006. There will be a Campaigners' Conference in Stoke-on-Trent (near to the railway) on Saturday 1st July 2006. The annual Rail Users' Conference will be held in November 2006.**

Join the *railfuture* Lottery. 50% of receipts are paid out as prizes each month. The remainder of the income, after deduction of expenses, is allocated to our Campaigns Fund. Details from Elisabeth Jordan, Railfuture Lottery Organiser, 13 Arnhill Road, Gretton, Corby, Northants NN17 3DN.

Consider making the Society a beneficiary of your will. Please consult your solicitor for advice on how to do this.

RAILFUTURE's MISSION STATEMENT

To be the number one advocate for the railway and rail users