

# **railfuture** **Northeast**

## **BRANCH BULLETIN – MARCH 2015**

*Railfuture is a national, independent body that advocates a modern and effective passenger and freight railway in Great Britain.*

*The North East is one of twelve branches in England along with Railfuture Scotland and Railfuture Wales that make up the national organisation.*

*Web site: [www.railfuture.co.uk](http://www.railfuture.co.uk) Twitter: [@Railfuture](https://twitter.com/Railfuture) and [@RailfutureNEast](https://twitter.com/RailfutureNEast).*

### **1 Branch AGM – Saturday 14 March 2015 – at Newcastle Art Centre, 2pm**

Please do your best to attend. Details enclosed with this bulletin. Here is some additional information:-

- a) Election of Branch Officers – nominations are invited for the posts of Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, *Railwatch* Correspondent and Press Officer. Nominations may be submitted to the Secretary ahead of the AGM or at the meeting itself.
- b) Branch Committee - currently comprises ten members and meets six times per annum. It is responsible for overall strategy, for the Branch programme and for monitoring rail activity and developments in the NE. Anyone interested in finding out more - or in joining even – is invited to speak with our Chair, Trevor Watson or with Secretary Ian Walker.
- c) NewRail – is a unique department within the University of Newcastle dedicated to getting undergraduates and post-graduates to study aspects of rail operations and strategy across the world. The Department also sponsors links with secondary school-children in our region and with professional rail people in UK and Continental Europe.

Over the past three years Railfuture North East has engaged with NewRail. Already in 2015 eight of our Committee members have attended a half day workshop when students presented outline details of assignments they intend to develop over the coming six months. The NewRail Education Group Manager, Marin Marinov, hopes to arrange a further workshop in late May/early June which will be open to the Branch's entire membership to attend – further details at the AGM.

NewRail is also mounting a three day Conference (in Newcastle) 15-17 July 2015. Marin Marinov has kindly agreed to allow members of our Branch to attend the event free of charge. Pre-registration will be required, however. Again, more details at the AGM, or from me, Tony Walker or from the NewRail web-site.

d) Recruitment of new members – there will be opportunity for a short discussion at the AGM about this matter. If you cannot get to the meeting do feel free to send any thoughts to the Secretary. The Committee is anxious to hear the views of as many members as possible.

## **2 The Chairman's Report for 2014**

The NE Branch has been active on many fronts, trying to influence the TOCs, Network Rail, local councils, business and educational establishments to adopt a favourable view of the issues we have raised.

Committee members made their views known at a breakfast meeting held at Newcastle Civic Centre, attended by local authorities and business leaders, regarding future aspirations for the East Coast Main Line.

Representatives of the Branch were invited to the TPEX opening of their new train crew depot at Newcastle and met the new staff recruited to provide additional TPEX services for the North East. We also attended the TPEX stakeholder meeting at Liverpool.

The Branch has continued to develop links and work with NewRail at Newcastle University, mentoring students on rail related topics and attending project presentations by overseas students. The Branch Chairman also gave a presentation to railway managers and academics attending the University Gen-y-Rail event entitled "Why do we need young engineers in today's railway?" As

part of the presentation Railfuture's organisation and aspirations were explained.

We held four well attended Branch meetings in the year; subjects included Borders' Rail, Northern and TPX Franchises, French tram systems and an update from the Aln Valley Railway.

The Chairman has attended stakeholder meetings accompanied by the SENRUG Chairman regarding the reopening of the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne system to passengers. He is pleased to report that Northumberland County Council is to provide capital funding for this in their 2015 budget and in subsequent years, with a target date of 2020 for restoration of passenger services.

A new station has been opened, James Cook at Middlesbrough together with an improved service between Middlesbrough and Nunthorpe.

Committee members involved with the Tyne and Wear Freight Partnership report that the rail link to the Port of Sunderland is being brought back into use.

I can confirm that Branch reps have met all the prospective bidders for the TPEX and Northern Franchises and made known our aspirations for quality rail service improvements in the North East.

**Trevor Watson**

**Chairman Railfuture North East**

### **3 The new East Coast Franchise**

This has proved to be a big news item throughout 2014 and into 2015 of course. The Department for Transport (DfT) had been under pressure for many months to leave East Coast Trains operating as a public company. Those supporting a public sector solution pointed to the large premium returned to the Exchequer by East Coast, nearly one billion pounds in less than five years. But it was clear as far back as 2013 that DfT (and the Minister) were determined to return East Coast to the private sector.

And so it was on 27 November we learned that a combined bid from Virgin/Stagecoach had secured the new franchise. Mind, even up to mid-night on the 26<sup>th</sup>, local TV and radio news bulletins were confidently predicting Keolis/Eurostar to be the winners!

Some additional services and destinations, some faster services (at least after 2020), more seats and new IEP trains are part of the Virgin/Stagecoach package. The new company, which intends trading as Virgin Trains East Coast, is required to pay £3 billion to the government over eight years. The Secretary of State, together with those who prefer a private sector option, have noted that Virgin/Stagecoach are required to return far more money to the Treasury than East Coast Trains managed.

We, Railfuture, wish the new incumbent well and we look forward to developing a constructive relationship with Managing Director David Horne and his team.

Three cautions to flag up:

(i) Railfuture, North East Branch hope that DfT and VT East Coast have done their sums correctly. A premium of £3b over eight years seems a massive challenge. We feel bound to ask how the company hopes to meet the commitment. By carrying more passengers obviously and presumably through significant fare rises? But what other measures are intended we wonder?

(ii) Not long after the award of the contract to Virgin/Stagecoach came news (from Rail Minister Claire Perry) that some current East Coast calls at Morpeth, Alnmouth and Berwick (not stipulated in the existing franchise) might be withdrawn. The Stagecoach Press Office later assured me that no such withdrawals were intended. Watch this space!

(iii) Media releases indicated that some additional destinations were planned including Sunderland, apparently via Newcastle! Given the five daily Grand Central trains that already serve Sunderland direct from Kings Cross and the south, and having regard to pathing issues between Sunderland and Newcastle, Railfuture North East wonders if current operational constraints are really conducive to this proposal?

Last word about East Coast. On 23 February our President, Martin Murphy, wrote on behalf of the Branch to Karen Boswell, Managing Director of East Coast Trains, to congratulate her and her team on the impressive 'rescue' job they had performed since 2009. Martin thanked Karen and all her staff for turning East Coast Trains into a well-respected long distance operator.

In addition I would like to put on record our appreciation for the tangible assistance the Branch received from East Coast Trains and, in particular, for the encouragement (and information) provided by Neal Smith, Director of Communications.

#### **4 News from Hitachi**

Construction of the new Hitachi train plant at Newton Aycliffe continues at a pace.

On 1 November last Hitachi announced that it was establishing its UK design office at Aycliffe. Described as a significant milestone, it helps form the hub for Hitachi's UK and European rail centre.

The company also clinched a deal with Scotrail for building seventy EMUs. This order is over and above the existing contract for the construction and supply of the IEP train sets for the Great Western route, and for the East Coast Main Line.

And on 19<sup>th</sup> January the very first IEP "training" carriage arrived at the Port of Tyne from Japan. This carriage will be used by trainees at the factory to acclimatise themselves with the new trains and their technology.

#### **5 The Bishop Line Community Partnership**

Congratulations to the Bishop Line Community Partnership which reports increased ridership and improved reliability on the Bishop Auckland – Saltburn route in 2014. In his forward to the Partnership's annual report, Chairman Charlie Walton has emphasised the importance of forming good relations with local communities, bus operators, the relevant train companies, Network Rail, Locomotion (Rail Museum) at Shildon and Local Authorities.

Long term aims include establishment of an hourly clock face service, improvements at Darlington Bank Top to facilitate easier through running for

local trains and, inevitably, introduction of better rolling stock i.e. away with the Pacers!

## **6 The Pacer Saga**

As this bulletin was being finalised (on 27 February), the Secretary of State for Transport, Patrick McLoughlin, informed the House of Commons that the Invitations to Tender (ITTs) for both the Northern and TPE franchises had just been issued.

Instead of sharing a lot of conjecture as to whether the Pacers are to go or to stay (interesting reading though it makes) I can say that the ITT states that the successful bidder will have to “provide plans to replace outdated Pacer trains”. At another point the ITT uses the phrase “removal of the existing Pacer trains”.

I know the wordsmiths among you will claim that this is still not “watertight”. Nevertheless, I think we should, at this point give the Minister the benefit of any doubt and take it that the Pacers **will** go during the period of the Franchise.

Though, for political reasons, it is difficult to see how Pacers can be retained in service much beyond 2020, Railfuture has been made aware of some of the complex technical issues that must be overcome in the run-up to replacement actually occurring.

But who knows, maybe, hiding in the wings, there is a good fairy at DfT who will come up with a nation-wide cascade and shuffle programme that will rescue all parties from further Pacer embarrassment!

## **7 The next Northern and TPE Franchises.**

With the publication today (27 February) of the two ITTs I have had to hastily revise this section of the bulletin. So here goes!

In presenting details to Parliament, the Secretary of State described the ITTs as providing a “transformation of rail travel in the North”.

Besides Pacer replacement (see above) the Northern ITT calls for the introduction of a build of 120 new carriages, the renovation of all existing rolling stock, tackling of crowding, the doubling of some services, additional investment in stations, the accommodation of 19,000 more commuters at

Manchester in the morning peak and the introduction of free Wi-Fi on all trains. More money is promised for Community Rail projects.

For TPE, the Minister intends that it should eventually become the main inter-city operator for the north. Thus rolling stock will have to accommodate more long-distance passengers. There will also be an expectation that new services will be developed such as Liverpool to Scotland, Newcastle to Glasgow and Crewe to Manchester Airport. And of course the next TPE operator will have to manage the implementation of electric services on the north cross-Pennine route from Liverpool to York and Newcastle.

Meantime, behind the scenes as it were, two new major northern 'overlord' organisations are emerging.

First, **Rail North**, which is an amalgam (in fact it is now a limited company) of the five transport sections of the recently launched Combined Authorities (namely Merseyside, Manchester, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and the North East). **Rail North** made detailed responses to the consultations about the next Northern and TPE franchises and its proposals proved quite far reaching. **Rail North** is now entering into a formalised partnership with DfT. We have just learnt in fact that management of the two franchises will be by a joint Rail North Ltd and a DfT transport team to be based in the West Yorkshire Combined Authority's offices in Leeds.

As the name implies **Rail North** is concerned primarily with railway services. Compare this with the second organisation that is now coming out of the woodwork which is called **Transport for the North (TfN)**. It seems that **TfN** is to be modelled on Transport for Scotland and Transport for London. In other words, **TfN** will have a responsibility for railways, for motorways and other major trunk roads, for buses, for taxis, for airports and for ferries. Assuming it comes to fruition, **TfN** will have wide powers in determining overall transport planning and strategy across the North, including a big say in the design of major transport projects.

At this point I do not know how the two organisations will inter-face – and probably many of the professionals don't know either! But things are definitely moving quickly and it looks as though there is going to be a significant

devolving of powers away from Whitehall to the region so far as transport is concerned.

I can say that various members of our Branch Committee have been involved in some of the early information seminars concerning the new organisations. We will continue to stay vigilant and keep Branch members informed of developments.

## **8 High Speed Rail**

In October, Sir David Higgins, boss of HS2, added his support to the idea of constructing an east-west high speed link across the North, now dubbed HS3. He pointed out that HS3, though not actually going direct to Newcastle would, nevertheless, together with HS2, bring a big improvement to some long distance train times. For example Higgins said the Birmingham-Newcastle time would reduce from the present 3hrs 14mins to 2hrs 7mins: Manchester to Newcastle would reduce from 2hrs 22mins to under two hours.

## **9 Port of Sunderland**

The Port of Sunderland was officially reconnected to the main rail network on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2015. Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin performed the opening ceremony when half a mile of line was brought back into use. He was accompanied by Lee Bayliss of DB Schenker and Matthew Hunt, port director at Sunderland. Also present was DB loco no 66001! Currently the port is handling 700,000 tonnes of freight p.a. This is expected to rise over the coming years.

## **10 Newcastle College Rail Academy**

This new academy first opened its doors last September. It is a purpose built, state of the art training facility designed to prepare young people for work in the rail industry. Aim is to get the students to sufficient standard to enable them to embark on official engineering and signalling apprenticeships. There is a strict emphasis on safety and on a disciplined approach to learning.

Located at Felling, there are currently 70 students. It is hoped that up to 800 will pass through over the next five years. The academy has been founded specifically to address a big skills gap in the industry, a gap that is likely to



increase in the near future as a substantial number of existing engineers come up to retirement age.

Some Committee members were able to visit the academy in November. It is extremely well equipped and clearly has a very committed staff group. I think it will prove a great asset to our region. It is to be officially opened in March.

## **11 Tees Valley Unlimited**

Local Authority leaders along with Tees Valley Unlimited are calling for comprehensive electrification of the rail network in the North East to help unlock the area's economic potential.

In the short term they seek electrification of the route from the ECML to Middlesbrough and to Teesport as part of the north Pennine electrification scheme. Longer term they want the Durham Coast route and the Tyne Valley line to be wired as well.

Other demands include the end of Pacers (!) and new timetables that take account of recent big changes in land use and which are responsive to contemporary lifestyles.

## **12 "Right Lines" – Northern Echo**

Last October, Joe Wallis, a journalist with the Northern Echo, started a campaign in his paper advocating significant improvements to the North East's rail network. Peter Walker and members of the Coastliners Rail Users' Group subsequently met with Joe and agreed some priorities. Please look out for items in "Right Lines" and don't hesitate to contact Joe, c/o the Northern Echo with ideas of your own.

## **13 Leamside**

An interim report (issued February 2015) by a Government Inspector has described the County Durham Plan, which has been five years in the making, as unrealistic and ill-thought out. Two proposed controversial 'relief' roads were deemed "unnecessary".

Of interest to Railfuture are the Inspector's comments about the Leamside Line (to be found at section 109 of his report):

“The longer-term aim of reopening the Leamside Line should have a much higher profile in the Plan. The re-opening would bring significant benefits both in terms of transport movements within the County and relieving congestion on the region’s transport arteries, namely the East Coast Main Line and the A1 (M)....Notwithstanding the considerable capital costs involved, the Plan should play its part in emphasising to Network Rail, the NELEP and the Government that it should be viewed as a sustainable transport funding priority”.

#### **14 The late Richard Keevil Taylor**

Richard Taylor, Dick to his friends, died on 24 October 2014.

Dick, whose working life was spent on the railway, originated from London. When he was promoted to the Darlington area he fell in love with the North East and decided, together with his wife Mary, this was where they wanted to be. They settled in Bardon Mill not far from Hadrian’s Wall, and also not far from the Tyne Valley line! After declining the chance of a “plumb” job in London, he was subsequently appointed as General Manager (under British Rail) for the North East and was responsible for the railway from Northallerton to Berwick.

It was whilst in this post that Dick became treasurer for the NE Branch of the then Railway Development Society. His professional wisdom, his unbounded courtesy and his eagerness to encourage members in all that they did greatly endeared him. And above all his sheer passion about anything to do with the world of railways was quickly communicated to anyone he met.

A memorial service to commemorate Dick’s life was held on 16<sup>th</sup> January at All Hallows in the village of Henshaw, Northumberland. Some 150 people packed the small church, including five representatives of our Railfuture Branch. Tributes to Dick were delivered by his brother and by two former work colleagues.

Besides members of Dick’s family and close friends, there was a large contingent of railway personnel present.

Many of us later moved on to the Centre of Britain Hotel in Haltwhistle where Mary hosted a lovely reception event. Our special thanks to her for making us all so welcome.

We extend our condolences to Mary and other members of the family as they mourn the passing of a truly good and godly (railway) man. I count it a privilege to have known him. May he rest in peace.

**Tony Walker**

**26 February 2015**

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[www.railfuturescotland.org.uk](http://www.railfuturescotland.org.uk) [www.railfuturewales.org.uk](http://www.railfuturewales.org.uk) [www.railwatch.org.uk](http://www.railwatch.org.uk)

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