



FAME AT LAST?

Abbey line as test case for new policy

As reported briefly in a last-minute addition to ABFLY 27, the St Albans Abbey to Watford Junction branch – ‘our’ line – is in the news. It has been selected by the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) as one of only five routes throughout the UK to form a pilot scheme for the Community Rail Partnership project. It is the only one in the south-east and the only urban route. The eventual target is for 60 of the country’s more lightly-used lines – covering 1300 miles (or 12.5% of the national network) and 420 stations (17% of the total) – to be removed from the requirement to abide by all the expensive standards laid down for main lines, such as maintenance, operating methods and with exemption from certain European Union regulations. To achieve this there will be a fresh approach to the way these lines are managed, marketed and supported, in the hope that a better service will be possible at lower cost.

Before the full scheme is implemented, the five selected ‘pilots’ will be used as test cases. Already ABFLY is involved and clearly will be more so as the scheme matures. Two members of the committee attended a national conference to hear both the proposals and the initial reactions (covered elsewhere in this newsletter). The committee has been briefed in a separate meeting and a detailed explanation of the scheme was given to ABFLY members on the evening of the AGM. By the time that you read this, ABFLY will have submitted a detailed response to a consultation paper produced by the SRA.

At this early stage many questions remain unanswered, but the scheme introduces the possibility of a more economical way to build the passing loop at Bricket Wood (a key ABFLY target for the past three years) and, through local community involvement, improved promotion; this should lead to an increase in passenger numbers which, in turn, would provide a more secure long-term future for the line. On the debit side, there are references to the need for economical rolling stock (trains) and the unpopular Pacers

(virtually buses on rails) are mentioned more than once. This is one of several issues on which ABFLY will need to maintain a very close watch.

Although one of the aims behind the overall project is to make better use of existing levels of government subsidy, clearly there will be a requirement for special funding for the pilot scheme, to which the SRA expect local sources to add further income, for example, to promote tourism.

In the foreword to the consultation paper, Richard Bowker, Chairman and Chief Executive of the SRA, makes several statements to launch the scheme, such as ‘Britain’s branch lines are important for social, economic and financial reasons... partnerships between the private, public and voluntary sectors are crucial... we will consider carefully the responses to this consultation, which will form the basis of a formal SRA strategy that will define and guide the development of Community Railways over the next decade... it is truly “everyone’s railway”’.

So here we have a major change of national policy. The extent to which community involvement will develop is one of the questions that should be answered as a result of our part in the pilot project. The degree of success of the Abbey line’s participation could have a marked effect on the future working (and even the futures) of many other lines throughout the UK, so we have a responsibility to match the fact that our branch has been selected as a test case.

This is my final report, as I am retiring from the post and a younger hand will take the editorial helm from the next issue. Clearly much more information will be available when the community rail scheme gets under way and the newsletter will keep you updated, so you need to remain on board with ABFLY. I welcome Ian Hibbert as my successor and I am sure that you will enjoy his fresh output; thank you for bearing with my written ramblings for so long!

David Ogilby.

THE EVENING OF THE AGM

On Tuesday 6 April, members turned up at St Stephen Parish Centre in encouraging numbers, initially to hear three speakers explain several issues relating to the Abbey line, prior to the Annual General Meeting.

Geraint Hughes, of Herts County Council, gave a useful, localised report on our position in the Community Rail Partnership (see Sanjay Kulkarni’s report on the national aspects). Clearly HCC is strongly committed to the line and the CRP, but stressed that there is a need for a 2:1 benefit/cost ratio; the benefits can cover many items including, for example, a business case for getting cars off the road and relieving congestion on the St Albans–Watford corridor. The economies of the CRP may enable the passing loop to be completed at lower cost than would otherwise be the case. HCC will continue the financial support for the Sunday service, but obviously would prefer this to be incorporated as a requirement under the franchise agreement with the train operating company.

Graham Smith from the Strategic Rail Authority confirmed that no decision had been made about the expected two-year extension to

Silverlink’s franchise, which expires in October this year. He updated us on the West Coast Route Modernisation programme, which will continue until 2008; the first new main line timetable improvements will be implemented this September.

Charlie Johnston, Group Station Manager at Watford Junction, stated that renewal of the long-line public address system on ‘our’ line was almost completed and he was confident that communication to people waiting at branch stations would be substantially improved.

Then at 9 p.m. came the Annual General Meeting, steered by John Webster, ABFLY’s new Acting Chairman. The year’s accounts were presented by John Cadisch, the Treasurer, and these were approved. Tricia Jennings, the Membership Secretary, reported that 24 new members had joined in the year for loss of 55 who had not renewed; she did not wish to remain on the committee, but would continue with her membership work. All other existing members – John Cadisch, Christopher Currell, Sanjay Kulkarni, and John Webster – were re-elected and two newcomers – Ian Hibbert and Tim White – were welcomed to the committee. John Webster confirmed that there will be a members’ meeting in October to bring us up to date on the CRP and other significant issues.

John Webster and I attended a national Community Rail Development (known also as Community Rail Partnership – CRP) conference at Peterborough on 26 March, at the invitation of Geraint Hughes, Passenger Transport Policy Manager for Herts County Council. The conference was sponsored by the Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) and was well attended by representatives of rail groups and local authorities connected with the sixty branch lines selected for participation.

We had the opportunity to meet Peter Twiss, Chairman of the Bittern line in Norfolk, one of the most successful routes that has involved local community participation, with a passenger growth of 140%; he invited the ABFLY committee to visit the line. Also we met Chris Austin, Director of the CRP at the Strategic Rail Authority, who wishes to meet ABFLY to discuss possibilities for the Abbey branch.

Strategy: the SRA has issued a consultative document and already there have been many supportive responses. The aims of the CRP scheme are to make the case for under-used branch lines via:

Increased revenue: integrating with buses where these cannot compete with rail journeys, rebranding a line to create a local image, reviewing timetabling in relation to connections and engaging local management to promote ridership.

Managing costs: adjusting levels of maintenance, more efficient operating methods, less complex contracts, reduced insurance, cost effective rolling stock (*this needs watching—Ed*) and changed disability standards.

Community involvement/partnership: formation of a tightly knit group of five to six people from the train operating company, local authority, rail user group and volunteers.

Approach: CRP is not about downgrading, but locally appropriate enhancements. The SRA will establish a framework for schemes with Network Rail. The five pilot schemes (which include the Abbey Line) have been selected because of their likely potential for improvement; these schemes are to produce profit and loss accounts and balance sheets as, at present, revenues are known but costs are not. There is not to be any new funding for the sixty selected lines, but better use is to be made of existing subsidies.

Special funding for the five pilot projects is being considered, provided this is matched by local authorities (in the Abbey line case these are Herts County Council, St Albans District Council and Watford Council.)

Initial feedback from senior observers in the rail industry has included requests for more lines to be included, reopening of some closed routes, light rail schemes (*we must watch this, too—Ed*) speed limits and local fares for promotional purposes.

National Express Group (holders of the current franchise for the branch) expressed several policy points: they are not in favour of bus substitution, fares should be market driven, there should be integration with buses (NEG run both!) and they support the use of Pacers that are so unpopular with users.

Herts County Council is keen to support the Abbey line (which is the only urban route in the pilot scheme and the only orbital line in the county) primarily to ease road congestion between the two largest towns in the region. HCC's intentions include the Bricket Wood passing loop, a 30-minute frequency, through-ticketing with buses and improvements through Watford Junction interchange, but to justify investment it is essential to establish an acceptable benefit/cost ratio.

ABFLY wishes to thank Geraint Hughes for giving us the opportunity to attend this useful conference.

Sanjay Kulkarni (albeit shortened by the Editor)

ABFLY continues to hold quarterly meetings with local rail management, to consider a wide range of issues that affect users of the branch. Any member who wishes to have a point raised is invited to send details to John Webster, the Acting Chairman, in writing to 17 Faircross Way, St Albans AL1 4RT, or by e-mail to john.w.webster@ntlworld.com

THE NEVER-BUILT EXTENSION TO ST. MICHAEL'S

Back in the 19th century the London and North Western Railway obtained an Act for constructing a branch railway from Watford to St Albans so as to feed into its London to Birmingham line. However, the terminus was to have been one-and-a-half miles beyond the present Abbey station, in St Michael's village. The St Albans to Watford Road (outside the Abbey station) would have been diverted slightly to the north, and taken over the extended railway by means of a bridge. The line would have continued in a gentle curve right across what is now Verulamium Park (then just farmland) to end almost opposite the *Rose and Crown* pub. The exact line of the route is in the Act's accompanying map but no details of the station in St Michael's were given. The LNWR did acquire all the properties on the south side of St Michael's Street that might have been needed to access their new station, its approach road and (presumably) goods yard. These properties continued in railway ownership right into British Railways days, but were finally sold off. This is very surprising as powers to build the St Michael's extension were formally withdrawn in 1858, the year the branch opened!

About half-way along the unbuilt extension was to have been "Didlem Halt", at the point where the railway crossed the Causeway (the raised path connecting the *Fighting Cocks* with the Roman Wall and King Harry Lane). No information was given in the Act about Didlem Halt. The St Michael's terminus station is likely to have been similar to the substantial LNWR building provided at the Abbey station once it was known this would be the end of the line. It has been described as "constructed of white bricks, with a low-pitched gable roof and two projecting pavilions". Sadly this building fell into disrepair and was demolished in the 1960s.

The citizens of St Albans in the 1850s, and the then Lord Verulam, turned against the idea of a St Michael's terminus at a relatively late stage. It is interesting to speculate on the likelihood of St Michael's village assuming quite a different character with constant noise and smoke from trains, and goods trucks in the sidings being shunted at all hours. As for Verulamium Roman site, the importance of this was of scant interest to the LNWR or local people at the time; another eighty years passed before Sir Mortimer Wheeler demonstrated so conclusively how much of archaeological interest lay buried just below the surface – which, like it or hate it, put St Albans firmly on the tourist map.

John Cadisch