

SARPA Newsletter No.27

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6.9.03. The 11.35am ex-Shrewsbury arrives in Machynlleth.

Chairman's Message.

Finally the years of waiting are over, and the winner of the Wales and Borders franchise is announced and proves to be something of a damp squib. There's far more to running a successful modern public transport system than self congratulatory patting one's own back on Cardiff Central station, whilst hoping no one notices that real improvements are not part of the package. I almost burst a gut laughing as the politicians tried to pretend that Wales was getting new trains announcing that the Valleys are to get seven 17 year old DMUs from the North of England as the major good news story! Our political leaders seem to have become even more clueless as time goes on.

Fortunately there are some chinks of light, and surprisingly they have been coming from the Strategic Rail Authority: not a body I've had a great deal of good to say about in the past. Avid followers of Chairman Richard Bowker's speeches and interviews will have noticed that he is putting some clear deep blue water between himself and the Department of Transport.

"Everyone's Railway" the SRA's case for rail certainly upset the machinery

and even got the part time Transport Secretary Alaister Darling to comment - there's nothing more satisfying than seeing a politician chuck his dummy because others aren't playing the game to his rules. It may not be mine nor other people's exact case for rail, but nonetheless that fact it spells out ABC, 1,2,3 like what rail does and what would happen if we did not have a viable railway is a clear indication that the SRA is prepared to stand up for rail and educate its political masters and the faceless civil servants. The fact that it has to be done is chilling though.

More good news from SRA land was the creation of a Director & department specifically to look at rural lines- Chris Austin- and the rejection of closures. The proposals for a two-tier maintenance regime are somewhat worrying though. However before I get carried away with my new found enthusiasm let's consider a subject that shall define whether we have "strategic" leadership and a "can do" attitude among the people that shape our railway. Virgin Trains is replacing its entire Cross Country and West Coast Main Line fleet of trains as I write; literally hundreds of carriages are coming "off lease" and being stored in Ministry of Defence depots across the country. Once upon a time when we had a sensible unified and integrated railway, and these coaches would have been cascaded to other routes. Not in the post privatisation UK railways though, there are no plans to introduce these carriages to areas that are crying out for more rolling stock. The benefit these carriages could produce which still have a good few years life in them is enormous. Provincial railways across England and Wales could be transformed and really play their role in improving transport for all. However nothing is done, we are told that it's "too expensive".

How exactly "too expensive" running trains that has already been paid for before privatisation and would grow traffic and therefore farebox income has never been satisfactorily explained. OK, there are a few issues that mean it's not as simple as just hauling them out of the sidings and forming the next train with them. It's a prime example of the "can't do" mentality. Here we have an easy in your face solution to many of the problems on today's railways, yet we have a system that prevents passengers receiving the levels of service they deserve.

All too often we hear Government representatives respond to any call for improved services with the caveat that the railway is too expensive. But why is the railway too expensive? The answer is with the politicians and civil servants who created the dysfunctional railway in the early 1990's and the same civil servants and different politicians who refuse to sort the issue out today. It's a problem of **their** making and **they** have to sort it out, excuses and moaning are not acceptable. The public deserve far better.

Gareth Marston, Newtown
28th November 2003

The winning bid by Arriva analysed in detail

The new all Wales franchise “would not bring many service enhancements” Kim Howells MP, Junior Transport Minister in reply to a question from the Welsh Affairs Committee at the House of Commons.

The starting point must be that this final winning bid is a pale shadow of what was anticipated and promised when the Wales and Borders franchise was initially announced a couple of years ago. Why? I hear the reader ask. Simply put, central government in London has got cold feet about improving the nation's public transport and therefore solving the nation's transport crisis. A depressing tale, which I will not go into here. Instead let's concentrate on how the rail network will shape up in Mid Wales over the next fifteen years starting from December 7th.

Money, money, money...

First of all the money on the table from central government for Arriva Trains Cymru is about the same as now, £120 Million a year which is 3.2% of what government is putting into the industry. Wales's population is 5% of the UK total. Of course other operators run into Wales but their influence is either marginal or they are a TOC that's moving toward premium payments to the SRA so a little can be added to that total. What amount of their subsidy Network Rail ploughs into Wales is harder to quantify, but on the whole only maintenance is done in Wales, not major projects. With Network Rail's Maintenance budget around the £1 Billion, there's probably about £50 to £80 Million spent in Wales, of which about half could be classified as being subsidy.

So where is this leading us? An educated guess would reckon that between £150 and £170 million a year in total is spent on the Welsh rail network from government funds, between 4% and 5% of the total. So working from official SRA figures, we can see that Wales gets its fair share of the booty. Claiming that commuters in the South East suffer because of support to Welsh lines just doesn't hold water.

Of course this is all very interesting, but let's consider the fact that 10% of what government was putting into BR just before privatisation was only £90 million, and 5% just £45 million. Even allowing for ten years inflation there's something drastically wrong, as despite what anyone says the rail services within Wales are little changed since BR days. Any gains or improvements have to be weighed against deterioration in other areas. The paradox of privatization: you

spend more and more just to stay still.

Improvements in Mid Wales then?

So, with the same money using the same discredited structure we are to be given...well, according to the official press release there are no cuts in the level of services promised, but no increases either. There's no new or additional rolling stock, the Class 158's will be pretty shabby in 2018. The station car park at Shrewsbury will get a makeover. There will be integrated bus/train tickets. However for this to be any real use Arriva will have to learn how to co ordinate their bus times with the trains. Take a look at their D75 Shrewsbury to Llanidloes timetable that parallels our line and serves many of the smaller villages that lost their stations in the 1960's, then try and plan an integrated journey! Bilingual station announcements will be available at every station (3 of the 7 in Wales on our line already have). Passengers will automatically be compensated if their train is an hour late, though there is no detail on anything that will prevent this appalling state of affairs happening. We are promised a simplified and more customer friendly timetable by December 2005. One station a year across Wales will be upgraded – yes one a year and finally regular travellers will be offered free travel if they “adopt” their station and tend it!

The fine detail on the official press releases is absent, and as the reader will note the winning bid is more conspicuous by what it omits than what it actually says.

How will Arriva address the maintenance issues' surrounding the Class 158's at Machynlleth depot with availability becoming very poor recently?

Where's the extra rolling stock we all know is desperately needed?

What about a more frequent service on our line?

Sunday morning services all year round?

Will there be an arrival at Aberystwyth from east of Machynlleth before 1120?

Are appalling connections with the coast line to be addressed?

How are traincrew hired in from Central Trains to be made to do their job properly?

Are station facilities to be upgraded?

Is there to be a commuter train to Shrewsbury in the morning?

Will the rolling stock used on our line be refurbished?

Keep your ears to the ground and there are some chinks of light.

Arriva Trains Group Managing Director Euan Cameron gave some illumination in evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee at the House of Commons. He explained that Arriva's bid is based around making better use of existing resources and creating clockface timetables: this will supposedly give better interchanges at key stations. Getting a train to Aberystwyth from Birmingham by 0920 was specifically mentioned as a benefit of the timetable recast, generating extra income at no extra cost! The Dyfi Junction loop was mentioned along with the need for a new loop to be installed at Montgomery as well if an hourly service was to work on the Cambrian; however this was in the context of finding funding partners, and is not part of the bid. Mr Cameron floundered on the question of how extra rolling stock was to be brought in. He made it clear that the SRA had specified the competing bidders to bid against no service enhancements, no new rolling stock nor station upgrades. More evidence that the hand of Westminster is at the tiller. However it was intimated that once the New Trans Pennine franchise receives its new rolling stock, the entire fleet of Class 175 Units built a couple of years ago will be transferred to the Wales and Border franchise and operate on the Marches line.

What the Assembly was told.

From a paper to be submitted by Arriva Trains Wales/Trenau Arriva Cymru Limited to the National Assembly for Wales, Economic Development and Transport Committee, 19 November 2003:

"The Aberystwyth to Birmingham service will be made regular two-hourly, the maximum possible with existing infrastructure. This will include a new Birmingham to Aberystwyth train arriving at Aberystwyth at about 09.20, two hours earlier than at present. Connections will be available at Shrewsbury between this two-hourly service and the Cardiff-Holyhead service described below, allowing convenient journeys between Mid-Wales and north or south Wales.

Arriva will work with stakeholders to finalise a robust and deliverable plan to achieve an hourly service on the Aberystwyth-Shrewsbury route and assist in the evaluation of the economic benefits this would achieve.

We are very pleased that the Cambrian Coastal Line has been selected by the SRA as a pilot in the United Kingdom for the new ERTMS signalling system. We believe this is a prestigious project for the Welsh rail network and could also be an essential ingredient in achieving service improvements on this route.

Services on the Cambrian Coast and Heart of Wales lines are tailored very specifically to local travel needs and at this stage no changes are proposed other than any minor amendments caused by the new timetable on other lines. Arriva will work with the established partnership and stakeholder groups to develop additional business on these lines”.

Conclusions.

You have to read between the lines but you can see how Arriva “won”. They’ve played on their ability to integrate –in theory anyway- their bus and train operations; reshuffled the pack on timetabling; given a promise of surplus trains from the North of England in a couple of years; all this for the same level of support.

So where does this leave us? Two years down the line in December 2005-yes that’s two years away we may see some recasting with the timetable that shakes out a few benefits. However we will all still be playing sardines in the same mainly two coach trains that will be getting older but will be plastered in Arriva’s corporate livery. A couple of the pressing issues on the Cambrian Main line seem to be answered by what we have discovered about Arriva’s bid. We’ll be able to get to Aberystwyth earlier, and have good connections to/from Cardiff and to/from North Wales destinations at Shrewsbury. The lack of a commuter train into Shrewsbury and appalling connections to the coast line will be prolonged by the two hourly clockface timetable. The main thing is that uncertainty is now at an end and we can work with Arriva’s management team come December 7th. Local Management will be kept at Shrewsbury. Back to lobbying the politicians then!

29th March: Llanbrynmair.



News of the Line

Birmingham

Opened in October, the new indoor Bullring shopping centre claims to be the largest indoor centre of its type in Europe. Mid Walians have direct access without needing to change trains to this facility, which is only a two-minute walk from New St station. Go out of New St through the “main” entrance where the taxi rank is and its literally right in front of you – don’t go up the escalators to the ghastly Palisades shopping precinct. The redevelopment has also made the walk to Moor St station substantially easier and safer with the concrete subways demolished. Cheap Day Returns are available to Birmingham from our stations. Those of you wanting to load yourself up with Christmas presents are advised by SARPA to try and avoid the 1634 departure from Birmingham New St if at all possible on a weekday due to the large number of Shropshire commuters that also use this service.

Welshpool

Three cheers as the infamous lights on the ramp were finally fixed in late September. Perhaps a miracle that no one had an accident due to not being able to see properly. One to remember when you get a trivial pursuit question asking what takes three years, several companies and the National Assembly to fix! As further evidence of the insane priorities that stalk the rail industry a few weeks before the lights were fixed TPWS was installed at all the points at Welshpool station including the one for the short trailing siding on the DOWN side.

Those of you unfamiliar with the jargon, TPWS is Track Protection Warning System - in lay terms a device that prevents trains passing red signals. Wow! Applause all round were much safer now! That is until you realise that the DOWN siding is used perhaps a handful of times a year by permanent way machines and the chances of any sort of accident there are far less than winning the lottery. All this of course comes at a cost, money that isn’t spent elsewhere and resources and man-hours that aren’t used elsewhere. It appears perfectly acceptable for passengers to walk in the pitch dark up and down a ramp risking injury for months even years for want of a simple repair, but great time and effort is put into useless “safety” devices at great cost. Such stupidity greatly increases the cost of the railway and crowds out real improvements for passengers.

Alas one of the lights has already failed.... will this run and run?

What ever happened to those Scottish trains?

As reported in Issue 25, there was a chance of a unit swap around between the National Express franchises, which actually made good sense and was evidence of a joined up railway approach. However the deal floundered at the last minute due to the Scottish Executive reportedly being unhappy about having just spent its money refurbishing trains that English and Welsh people would be riding around in.

Shrewsbury

The town celebrated the five hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Shrewsbury during the War of the Roses this year. Network Rail had its own Battle of the Shrewsbury with the buddleia rapidly engulfing the triangle around the signal box. We're pleased to announce that the buddleia lost.

The group pressing for the reintroduction of Intercity services to Shrewsbury have been told by Virgin Trains that its technically feasible for them to run an hourly service from Euston to Shrewsbury, by the simple expedient of dragging a Pendolino set from Wolverhampton with a diesel locomotive.

Rumors are abound that central government is looking to relocate a number of governmental departments away from central London to the English regions. The Strategic Rail Authority is apparently on the list. The now disused ex BR Office Block on Chester St near the station would be a good location. Of course a side benefit would be that the rail link to London from Shrewsbury would soon improve!

Shrewsbury & Atcham MP, Paul Marsden is to join the Commons Transport Select Committee.

Machynlleth

There is growing concern over the mechanical and internal condition of the fleet of eleven Class 158's based out of Machynlleth. Though under contract with National Express owned Maintrain for more heavy repair work to be done at Tyseley, units sent there are reportedly being returned without work being done since it was confirmed that Nat Ex had not won the Wales and Border franchise. Sorting this out has to be the number one priority for Arriva on December 7th?

The train depot there claims to have the youngest qualified train driver in Britain at just 21 years old.

National Eisteddfod.

Wales and Borders report that its connecting bus service from Welshpool and Newtown to Meifod in August (which did connect reasonably well with the trains) was poorly supported and was a loss maker.

Aberystwyth

The annual visit by the Hasidic Jew community happened again, the groups refusal to talk with the railway causing chaos on their way to Aberystwyth with a horrific day had by all, as over five hundred extra passengers with luggage suddenly turned up and expected to get on service trains. An offer of a special train just for them was apparently turned down by the group. Their return on August Bank Holiday Monday was less problematical with extra rolling stock drafted in to strengthen scheduled services. The choice of return date was perhaps fortuitous as a normal Saturday would have been mayhem. However a number of ordinary passengers in Aberystwyth were unhappy with posters that appeared advising people not to travel as the trains were fully booked that day.

The station was a finalist in the Best station in Britain competition in the category of small manned stations this year.

Network Rail have put back repairing the damaged points till December.

What's a Cornish pasty doing on our line?

Wales and Borders have made no secret that they view their rolling stock fleet as interchangeable, so a number of Canton based units including the advertising liveried "Ginsters" unit have appeared on the Cambrian. A Machynlleth based unit was reportedly spotted at Carmarthen earlier this year.

Victoria St, London

The SRA's Director of Communications or spin-doctor Ceri Evans has got himself all upset about the Rail Passenger Committee for Wales. He has been briefed against them and labeled them "whingers" and accused them of demanding "uncosted aspirations". However many members of RPC Wales took this to confirm their belief that they were effectively fulfilling their watchdog role and would not be defeated by negative, unhelpful, off the record, SRA briefings.

You saw it first on the Cambrian!

Virgin Cross Country Trains are to take out a number of seats on their Voyager Units to create space for luggage. Following the lead of the Machynlleth based Class 158's!

Growling in the night

This year has seen the visit of "Sandite" trains, Sandite being a paste that's applied to counter effect the slippage of wheels on greasy rails caused by leaf fall. The Upper Severn Valley has been reverberating to the sound of Class 37's "growling" around about midnight hauling these trains.

Crossing Keepers days are numbered

The three locations that have seen temporary-crossing keepers in the last couple of years will soon disappear as Powys County Council announced they have secured funding so that these "dangerous" crossings can be abolished.

Newtown

A bridge bash incident at the Dolfor Road Bridge Newtown on Monday 17th November saw the line closed for an hour as safety precaution.



The imposing façade of Machynlleth Station

Like others on the Machynlleth to Caersws section of the line, the grey stones probably came from the excavations for Talerddig cutting.

Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passenger Association

AGM: Machynlleth 6th September 2003

We held our AGM in the Wynnstay Hotel Machynlleth on Saturday 6th September. 21 members were present to discuss the years activities. This year we had two guest speakers — for the third year running we welcomed Paul Harley, Chairman of the Rail Passengers Committee Wales and a new guest Chris Parrot of Tranex Turismo S.A UK Division, who gave us a fascinating slide show and talk on tourist train development in Tierra del Fuego. Chairman Gareth Marston also gave a presentation on his vision for the Cambrian in 2018 — and the changes needed to achieve it.

Unfortunately space constraints mean we can't give a full report here; however copies of the AGM's minutes, the Chairman's annual report and his Vision for 2018 are all available via any of the committee.

The Treasurer reported that membership was on the increase, now being 76. Donations were down, as was bank interest. However, the finances were still quite good, with a balance of £303.08, and an overspend on the year of £55.38.

The Chairman reported that monthly meetings are much more than most rail user groups have. The meeting felt that the present mix of evening and Saturday day meetings was right; it was noted that meetings held further west attracted more members, and Saturday meetings were very popular. We have supported the Carno Station action group in their efforts. Press releases from SARPA had led to very positive responses over the year, leading to news items in the local and national (Welsh) press, as well as the BBC, including online coverage.

Paul Harley in his address outlined a number of issues. Arriva claimed to be able to run the franchise using less money than National Express do at present. This may mean fewer station staff; fewer trolley services; the end of on-train cleaners. The present franchisees have been good in these areas. He wouldn't want the franchise to go back to Central Trains. He hoped for better integration of bus and rail services, **but doesn't want bustitution**. It would be acceptable to see extra bus services offered, which could be transferred to rail if they created enough demand. ERTMS trials will be a tremendous boost for the line. It is hoped that employment opportunities for local people will be provided.

David Williams has done a great job, producing guides for Cambrian lines: to beaches, on walks and on Great Days Out.

He wished to thank SARPA for its activities: it was good to have a monthly meeting; the newsletter was very good; it had a good membership; and he wished to thank Gareth for his work on the RPC Wales.

Roger Goodhew asked about promoting links between the RPC Wales and RPC Midlands, since the Aberystwyth to Birmingham service was a concern of both organisations. Paul agreed that this was a good idea. He pointed out that this was also beneficial for the Chester-Wrexham-Shrewsbury services, and that with the West Coast work next year, many Holyhead services would be re-directed via Wrexham and Shrewsbury.

The provision of an earlier west-bound train: Paul pointed out that it depended on the availability of trains and crew.

On the possibility of providing buses to create an hourly service, Paul pointed out that they would be much slower than the trains (which provide an excellent service in point of speed: over 50mph average on a single line), and so, with the possible exception of a Newtown to Shrewsbury service, could not fill in the gaps in an hourly timetable.

On the possibility of the Welsh Assembly offering Senior Citizens free train travel (as they already have free bus travel within Wales): the Assembly is already concerned with the high take-up of travel with the bus passes, though it could be trialled on say the Heart of Wales line.

Non passenger traffic: there are weight limit problems. Unloading might have to be done at night. There is the possibility, which EW&S are looking at, of using MailRail vehicles for e.g. moving Securicor traffic. Michael Williams pointed out that there is still the possibility of a trial movement of timber from Aberystwyth.

Dr Sensible & Mr Fruit Cake?

Having arrived as a Junior Transport Minister this summer, the Member for Pontypridd instantly won plaudits by questioning the bizarre “safety spending” fixation that afflicts the rail industry. However since then it’s been largely downhill for Kim Howells, who appears to have entered a one-man “talking through my rear end” competition. In a remarkable Jekell and Hyde type transformation he has publicly gone on the offensive against the railway. For those of you who have not come across his drivelling he has come out with such priceless classics as complaining that trains go around carrying nothing but fresh air, claiming that cars are greener than trains, claiming that UK transport policy is entirely influenced by “200,000 registered train spotters”, dismissing calls for more investment in the rail network as “train spotter mentality”, and saying that road users get a raw deal

because of the railways. In fact listening to him you would think that the national debt is caused by government support for the Heart of Wales line.

Whilst normally pity should be heaped upon this poor soul and wishes sent that he gets well soon, you realise this is actually coming from a government minister who is shaping and making decisions that effect all are futures. It would be laughable if it were not so serious.

Lets examine his "claims":

Trains go around carrying nothing but fresh air - from someone who claims to be a regular rail traveller this is fantasy land nonsense, implying that the trains aren't used. As we all know every line in the country cries out for additional rolling stock due to overcrowding or inadequate service levels.

Cars are greener than trains - colour scheme wise perhaps. Another piece of nonsense. How much pollution do 150 cars pump out compared to one train then? According to the SRA rail produces 73 grammes of carbon dioxide per passenger kilometre and cars....114.

UK transport policy is entirely influenced by "200,000 registered train spotters" – As we all know every time SARPA cracks its whip Government ministers are straight on the phone to the railway companies to alter things. This is a clear indication of how frustrated certain sections of government are that they can't have their way because of the work of rail campaign groups.

"Train spotter mentality". – every rail user – which is 50% of the population according to the SRA – will call for more investment in the railway by which they mean real investment not money wasted on "safety", lawyers, accountants, contractors profits and rebranding exercises. Labelling half the electorate anorak wearers is a spectacular piece of vote catching.

Road users get a raw deal - UK transport policy for over forty years has been about encouraging and appeasing road users. It,s not the railways fault that our roads suffer from gridlock: if they invested in rail properly they could help out road users by relieving the overcrowding.

So the next time an important decision is made who will be there Dr Sensible or Mr Fruit Cake?

SARPA MONTHLY MEETINGS. 2003-4

Meetings for 2004

Please double check. Dates, venues, times correct as of going to print (November 2003).

May be subject to change.

| Month | Day | Time | Venue |
|-----------|--------------------------|------|-----------------------------------|
| January | Saturday 10th | 1100 | Owain Glyndwr Centre Machynlleth* |
| February | Tuesday 3 rd | 1845 | Red Lion, Caersws. |
| March | Tuesday 2 nd | 1900 | Bell Hotel, Newtown |
| April | Saturday 3 rd | 1200 | Railway Hotel, Borth |
| May | Tuesday 4 th | 1915 | Pinewood Tavern, Welshpool. |
| June | Tuesday 1 st | 1900 | Bell Hotel, Newtown |
| July | Saturday 3 rd | 1130 | Cambrian Hotel, Aberystwyth |
| August | Tuesday 3 rd | 1915 | Wynnstay Hotel, Machynlleth. |
| September | Saturday 4th | 1115 | AGM Plas Dolerw, Newtown. |
| October | Tuesday 5 th | 1915 | Pinewood Tavern, Welshpool. |
| November | Tuesday 2 nd | 1930 | Hobbs Room, Library, Shrewsbury |
| December | Tuesday 7 th | 1900 | Bell Hotel, Newtown. |

* Note joint meeting with Railfuture Cambrian Lines Branch

Contributions from people who can't attend are more than welcome.



The east end of Machynlleth

Not only is the train green, so is the permanent way.

WANT TO JOIN SARPA?

Please complete the form beneath and send with cheques to Treasurer Ivor Morris at the address beneath. The membership year runs from January to December. The membership fee is £5.00 per annum for individuals and for organisations. Please make any cheques payable to SARPA. Donations are of course welcome.

- SARPA will lobby for better rail services.
- Act as a watchdog to safeguard the lines future.
- Meet in public once a month.

All members will receive our quarterly Newsletter free of charge.

The majority of our expenditure goes towards the cost of publishing and distributing our newsletters. We subscribe to the Shrewsbury Rail Users Federation (£10 for 2003/2004), Transport 2000's Platform campaign and occasionally pay for room hire. Any surplus is held as an emer-

Name(s)

Address:

gency fund for the future. None of the officers gain financially in any way from SARPA.

I / we would like to join SARPA.

Please delete as appropriate.

SARPA: www.shrewsbury-to-Aberystwyth.org.uk

Useful Addresses

Arriva Trains Wales:

WB4, Brunel House, 2 Fitzalan Road, Cardiff CF24 0SU
Tel 0845 6061 660
Email: customer.services@arrivatrainswales.co.uk

RPC Wales:

Secretary, St. David's House, Wood Street, Cardiff CF10 1ES

Tel 029 2022 7247

Email: info.wales@railpassengers.org.uk

Networkrail:

Community Relations, Railtrack House, Euston Square, London NW1 2EE

The Association of Train Operating Companies:

ATOC, 3rd Floor, 40 Bernard Street, London WC1N 1BY

Central Trains Limited

Central Trains Limited, PO Box 4323, Birmingham B2 4JB

Tel. 0121 654 1200

Virgin Trains

Virgin Trains, Customer Relations, PO Box 713, Birmingham, B5 4HH

Tel. 0870 789 1234

For Train Times and Fares Call:

08457 48 49 50 (24hrs)

0845 60 40 500 (Welsh Language Service)

0845 60 50 600 (Textphone)

For ticket reservations please call:

0870 9000 773

OFFICERS OF THE ASSOCIATION

Chairman: Gareth Marston: 64 Churchill Drive, Barnfields, Newtown, Powys. SY16 2LH. 01686-625716. E-mail: gareth.marston@btopenworld.com

Treasurer: Ivor Morris: 2 Dingle Rd, Welshpool, Powys. SY21 7QB. 01938-554463

Newsletter Editor: Denis Bates, 86 Maesceinion, Waun Fawr, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 3QQ. Tel. 01970-617667. E-mail deb@aber.ac.uk

Shrewsbury Rail Users Federation Representative: Roger Goodhew: 12 Granville St, Shrewsbury, Shropshire. SY3 8NE. Tel. 01743 358873.

Committee Member: Angus Eichoff: The Forge, Whitehouse Bridge, Welshpool, Powys. Tel. 01938-553572.

E-mail angus.metal@telco4u.net

The position of secretary is currently vacant,

if anyone wishes to fulfil that role or become active within the committee please contact Gareth Marston.