

SARPA Newsletter No.24

Inside this issue:

Editorial	1
An excellent summer on the Cambrian lines	2
The politics of insanity	3
News of the line	5
The AGM	6
An earlier westbound Train?	10
Shrewsbury-Aberystwyth liaison Committee	12
Some silly arguments	13
Welshpool to Shrewsbury, an update, 1st October 2002	14
Meetings, and Officers of the Association	16



Aberystwyth in the 80s, with An HST on an excursion. The signal box was still in use, and there are oil tank wagons in the background.

Editorial: Rachel Jones

I am writing this quarter's editorial in the place of Chairman Gareth Marston as he is currently overwhelmed by domestic priorities.

Recently, South Central rail network announced that their delays were caused by passengers getting onto trains too slowly. Happily, delays on the Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth line- and the service in general- has improved greatly; delays are down, customer care is up.

However, as I write, news has come through that the Government is to cut funding to the railways while implementing multi-billion pound road building schemes, and train operating companies (TOCs) bidding for the Wales & Borders franchise

have been told by the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) to make cuts of up to 20%. TOCs are not allowed to make the cuts by closing routes- so in that sense our line is safe - but it is inevitable that cuts to the level of service will occur. Certain charges, such as track access, are fixed therefore early morning, off-peak and late night trains will be targetted and we might well find ourselves back with the former standard of dirty carriages, broken seats, blocked lavatories and no refreshments.

We will have an opportunity to discuss the future of the line if the SRA sends representation to this year's AGM, to be held in Machynlleth. We have invited Chairman Richard Bowker and are currently awaiting a reply.

Happy New Year.

Rachael Jones, Secretary.

An excellent summer on the Cambrian Line

This summer, more people used the train and performance improved dramatically on the Cambrian Line. That's the message that Wales & Borders Trains will be giving to rail users today.

Managing Director, Chris Gibb, was in Newtown recently to tell the Shrewsbury & Aberystwyth Railway Line Liaison Committee how the railway line has enjoyed an excellent summer, with substantial increases in passenger numbers as well as more trains arriving on time.

He said: "Passenger journeys at the end of the summer rose 17.5 percent against the same period last year, and train performance was the best in recent years, with 99.8 percent of trains running and 87.8 percent arriving at destination within 10 minutes of schedule."

Earlier this year, Wales & Borders Trains introduced a number of initiatives to improve services on the line, including more through trains, on-train cleaners, catering services and free seat reservations and launched a major marketing campaign with TV personality Sian Lloyd. Last month it also announced a £2.5 million pound scheme to upgrade information systems at stations including Shrewsbury and stations along the Cambrian Coast and Cambrian Main lines.

"It's good to see our efforts to improve train punctuality, cleanliness, information, refreshments and train capacity being rewarded with increasing passenger numbers", said Chris Gibb. The improvements have been brought about through the hard work by our Mid Wales staff which I applaud".

The Politics of Insanity?

Gareth Marston

When the history books come to be published the Blair Government will probably go down as one of the most stupid in modern history. Why? Quite simply they have had the opportunity to make a lasting difference to the nation in one key area that has been failing the nation for decades - transport. Instead of truly making their mark they have opted for fudge, indecision and accepting the failed status quo. The problem is obvious: the failure of the nations transport system due to an over-reliance on one mode; the solutions are well discussed and documented. The opportunity was there, a huge parliamentary majority, an unelectable opposition almost guaranteeing two or even three terms, and widespread recognition of the problem that even the vociferous road lobby could not argue against. One key component of the solution, a properly funded and expanded rail network was easily obtainable if the right effort was made. Instead they now question rail's "value for money" and whether it can make any difference.

There are several notable failures in the Governments record on the rail industry since 1997: the latest one to add to the list is that they are now mistaking the failings of the dysfunctional structure of the privatised rail industry in the UK as being general failings of rail itself. Yes the rail industry in the UK has out of control costs and has not "delivered"; however this is the rail industry created by decades of under funding compounded by the zany privatised structure created by the Tories and perpetuated by five and a half years of Labour in power. It is not the railway that we all know can exist, and which many of our continental neighbours have. Of course rail is not the complete answer to the nations ails, but when you run around shouting "trains can't replace the car", stick your head in a bucket and wish a problem will go away rather than addressing it, you're asking for trouble.

A lot of the problems on the railway today could and should have been addressed by Labour since they've been in power. The structure of the industry was so obviously artificial and inefficient that the rise in costs should have come as no surprise. Any system that has a myriad of fragmented players and relies on contractors and sub contractors ad nauseam, all wanting their share of the booty, is inherently cost exponential. Labour has messed around at the margins when radical undoing of the Tories work was needed. Wasn't it a European directive that led to the splitting of the wheel from the rail? Only in the UK has this directive been taken to this extreme other. Other European Countries cite the UK as an example of bad practice not to be repeated.

Leadership and direction? John Prescott saying one thing in public and then not

being allowed to do it by Tony and Gordon — no wonder the UK is the transport joke of Europe. Then there's allowing the HSE to invent new and bizarre ways of imposing costs in the name of "safety". On top of that there is "consultant culture", where large sums are paid to firms of consultants with seemingly little knowledge of rail, to produce reports at great cost every time even the most obvious decision needs to be made. All of these are within the government's ability to control; they only have themselves to blame. It's not rail that's failing the nation, it's Government that's failing rail.

I was at a speech by SRA Chairman Richard Bowker in November, and it was clear that he is caught in-between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand central government is railing against cost and questioning the very existence of rail which he has to fight against; on the other he is understandably taking the flak from the industry and the passengers about the prospect of cuts in funding and lack of major investment. He has made it clear that he has to make the case for rail in time for the 2004 spending review as a number one priority. Stating the obvious I know, but with a fifth column in his own organisation he has his job cut out. We have the bizarre situation of people within his own organisation questioning the need for railways in certain circumstances. How on earth can he make the case for rail if his underlings are spinning against rail?

In the meantime central government has opted for road expansion. School children can tell you that you can't build your way out of road congestion. Recent polls conducted for the Rail Freight Group show that over 90% of the population want more freight sent by rail. Oil prices are on the increase due to political instability world-wide and yet the government still doesn't act to sort out the problem. Pandering to the road lobby may result in directorships and consultant's fees once your political career is over, but it won't solve the crisis in the UK's transport sector.

Until government recognises that it does have to actually make the right decisions (not make wrong ones and then pat itself on the back about how tough its been — Mr Darling take note) then we will forever be in a transport mess.

Dovey Junction in the 1960s: a coast line train with a Manor class locomotive at the head.



News of the line

Barmouth Bridge

In a recent issue of 'RAIL' there's a picture of 37114 "City of Worcester" on Barmouth Bridge. Apparently this was to "test repairs" and Network Rail GW zone described the results as "very successful". We're told this means that 37's will now be allowed over Barmouth Bridge on engineering trains. Hopefully charters will be allowed to, and perhaps other RA5 locos.

What odds will anyone give on D9016 being the first Deltic to Pwllheli?!

From the Cambrian News website:-

RAIL travellers on the Cambrian Coast line are to have an early Christmas present with news that two through trains to and from Birmingham will be introduced in the near future.

And there will be catering facilities albeit a snack trolley on board and the line to Pwllheli will be promoted as a through line and not a branch off the Aberystwyth line.

Western Mail (18/9)

The Western Mail has carried a story that Coast line from Mach to Pwllheli is to be one of three national (and all Welsh) trial areas for this system. Conversations with Chris Gibb & John Curley (Railtrack GW) indicate that the entire Cambrian system would be included in a trial.

Significance to us is that

1. RETB gets replaced before it becomes life expired.
2. Signalling engineers will be available for work on Cambrian. Lack of these was one of the primary reasons Railtrack gave for pulling out of

the Dyfi Loop Project. The possible resurrection of Dyfi Junction and Dyfryn Arududwy loops is back on the cards.

Station Information Systems

Following the recent announcement by Wales & Borders Trains that they have secured funding from the Strategic Rail Authority and Welsh Assembly Government for a major upgrade of passenger information systems at 46 stations across Wales and England, SARPA Chairman Gareth Marston warmly welcomed Project Inform Cymru as a major boost to passengers in Mid Wales.

Commenting on the £2.2 million project which includes all stations on the Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth line Gareth Marston said: "Passengers on the Cambrian system have long suffered from either no information or had the indignity of trying to use the system currently installed which is discredited due to its inability to keep passengers informed of any delays. The new system based on the highly successful Project Inform system already installed elsewhere in Wales is directly linked to the signaling system meaning that it can give real time information, is bilingual and capable of giving rail- bus link information. It is a major step forward especially at unstaffed rural stations".

Though generally welcoming the news he added: "I hope that an information point is installed in the car park at Welshpool station as well as replacing the current one on the platform due to the unique nature of passenger facilities at this location".

Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passenger Association (SARPA)

AGM: 7th September 2002: The Old College, Aberystwyth

The meeting started at 13.30

Present

Gareth Marston (Chairman)	Ivor Morris (Treasurer)
Rachael Jones (Secretary)	Denis Bates (Newsletter Editor)
Michael Williams (Powys County Council representative)	

Other members

Tony L Burton	Vivian Skerm	Lewis Smith
Ian Ball	Charles Williams	David Taylor
P Burton	Paul Challis	J Davies
GT Jones	Robert Knight	Lembit Opik

Simon Thomas MP (Ceredigion) was present as a guest. Aberystwyth Town Council was represented by Cllr Owen-Jones

There was also a number of non-members in attendance.

Guest speaker

Paul Harley (Rail Passengers' Committee (Wales) Chairman)

Record of proceedings

Gareth Marston welcomed guests and introduced the officers of SARPA. He explained that the reason for the need for a prompt finish was that some attendees need to catch a return train. He explained that, as the minutes of the previous AGM were lengthy, he would not go through them but would post out a copy if requested by anyone.

Chairman's report

GM presented a written report and a few minutes was given for attendees to read through it. Points mentioned in the report were:

1. Newsletter
2. Flooding
3. Website
4. Wales & Borders franchise

5. Twenty point wish list
6. Meeting about Welshpool Station
7. Being mentioned in Parliament
8. Relationship with Rail Passenger Council (Wales)
9. Member correspondence to the Chairman
10. Shrewsbury Rail Federation
11. Relationship with Wales & Borders train operating company
12. Dyfi Loop
13. Powys County Council transport plan
14. Road/rail bridge safety
15. Ceredigion County Council attitude
16. SRA's strategic plan
17. National Assembly
18. Monthly meetings

A minor altercation arose during point 15 with Cllr Owen-Jones objecting to Ceredigion County Council being referred to as anti-rail. Mr Lewis Smith responded to this objection and an agreement was made to discuss the matter privately later. Lewis Smith and GM are both contacting Owen Jones after the meeting.

GM made a note that the 20 point aspiration list would be updated.

Michael Williams commented on the cleanliness of trains.

GM noted that many people other than members were reading the newsletter and that there had been many positive comments about its quality.

There was a comment from the floor (Ian Ball) about a plan to change the seating arrangement in carriages in order to alleviate the overcrowding problem i.e. to provide more seats. The change in seating would, however, mean cramped conditions for tall people.

There was a comment from the floor that re-opening lines was much more expensive in mainland UK than in the Northern Ireland –still state owned and run.

Treasurer's report

Receipts £

Payments £

Subscriptions	183.00	Printing of 3 newsletters	129.00
Donations	115.00	Postage	34.20
Bank interest	0.51	Stationary	11.38
		Subscriptions	30.00
		AGM 2001	64.00
Totals	298.51		268.58
Credit in hand			29.93

Address by Paul Harley

PH commented on GM's contribution to the Rail Passenger Committee (Wales).

PH talked of his disappointment at the delay to the Dyfi Loop initiative. He said that an hourly service was long overdue, and that perhaps something would get underway now that Network Rail had emerged, but that it was down to the SRA to get the plans underway. PH urged attendees not to let the Dyfi Loop initiative die as a topic.

MW mentioned that it has been raised as a topic by Powys County Council.

PH affirmed that the money for the scheme was still present.

PH welcomed the cleanliness and consistent trolley service provided by Wales & Borders Trains, and the repair service provided at Machynlleth. He mentioned that these services were in W & B's own interests as its parent company, National Express, was one of the bidders for the Wales & Borders franchise.

PH said that the RPC was disappointed at the failure to upgrade Shrewsbury to Wolverhampton to 90 mph running and blamed planning by Railtrack. He said that he expected a change when National Rail takes over.

PH said that he was delighted that SARPA was so active and praised the number of attendees at today's AGM. Speaking of his thoughts on the future, PH said that perhaps this time next year the Dyfi Loop might be underway. He looked forward to next year's AGM.

Items for discussion

Tony Burton asked who it was that we should lean on to move infrastructure projects forward PH said that the SRA or somebody would have to pay for it. He mentioned a planned, massive increase in train frequency in October 2002

(Virgin Cross Country's Operation Princess) possibly leading to punctuality problems around Birmingham.

LS asked if everything was down to the SRA. PH said that he will ask the SRA to establish an office in Cardiff to improve communication and show a willingness to co-operate with the Assembly.

Lembit Opik asked if there was a contingency plan for the predicted punctuality problems in October 2002. He also asked if there was anything we could do to push forward the Dyfi Loop initiative.

PH replied that Virgin Trains had vehicles to shift broken-down stock but he knew of no contingency plan as such. He said that Tony O'Donovan and James Widdowson could organise buses as a relief measure. LO noted that he would travel to London by train only if he did not have to be there at a definite time.

PH said that perhaps the person to pressurise was Alistair Darling. He said that he could not see Tony Blair being interested. He said that Richard Bowker (Chairman, SRA) was willing to listen but considered that tackling overcrowding in the south east of England was the best value for money.

MW said that Ceredigion, Powys and Gwynedd did work together on transport matters but perhaps the links could be strengthened. He mentioned there being a mid Wales transport partnership.

A person from the floor said that money was allocated by the Assembly but that there were not the contractors to do the work. A person from the floor said that there had been an improvement in rolling stock over the years but now the infrastructure needed to be improved. The person suggested re-opening closed lines and using welded rails rather than jointed ones.

MW asked that trains should stop where locals wanted them to stop. He specifically mentioned Carno.

Simon Thomas reported that the SRA had said the winner of the franchise bid could carry out the Dyfi Loop scheme. He said that SARPA should put pressure on the winner otherwise we could be waiting for years.

PH said that Chris Gibb of Wales & Borders Trains would be willing to do it but authority would be needed from the SRA- problems of splitting rail from wheel!

A person from the floor mentioned seeing no manned crossings in Holland and that he was incredulous that manned crossings existed in the UK in the 21st century. GM said that the crossings at Moat Lane and Caersws should have been automated but the funds were not authorised. GM mentioned some correspondence on the matter of crossing safety with Mick Bates (Assembly Member). LO made some comments about levels of risk. He said that the only way there would be no risk would be if there were no trains.

TB spoke briefly about the public wish for the station at Carno to be re-opened. He said that there was to be a meeting on Friday 27th September 2002 which would be attended by LO & GM. A person from the floor said that trains stopping at short platforms needed to have selective door opening.

Charles Williams raised the matter of an early train westwards. GM said that Chris Gibb considered there to be more deserving projects and that staff were not willing to man an early train. TB noted that four trains left Shrewsbury going elsewhere before the first train to Aberystwyth and this seemed unfair. He asked that SARPA lobby the SRA about this. GM said that he would keep raising this matter.

GM thanked people for attending the AGM and apologised for the short time permitted.

Denis Bates asked for contributions for the newsletter.

An earlier train westbound from Shrewsbury?

Gareth Marston

The subject of an earlier westbound train from Shrewsbury was raised at the AGM. SARPA has raised this issue in the last year on the following occasions:

October 01-verbally with Chris Gibb at the "Welcome to Wales & Borders" meeting in Aber.

October 01 - written follow up between myself and Chris.

Jan 02 - It was discussed by Chris Gibb when he attended our meeting in Aber.

Exerpt from minutes copied below:

Tony Burton said that he was irked that it was not possible to get into Aberystwyth before 11.15 in the morning as there was no early train. He

asked why we were talking about an hourly service when there was not even an early train. There was agreement from the floor. CG said that he had looked at providing an early train: it would require an extra train set and there was not one available at present. He said that he was well aware of the need for an early train. He said that it was a matter of priorities: he had to decide which was more important, an early train to Aberystwyth or easement of congestion on, say, the Valley Lines.

GM mentioned that until the SRA announced the new franchisee, there would be no new trains provided. CG said that there was not enough stock nationally; that the delay in franchising had meant that stock that could have been made, had not been made. He said that he was going to get things moving in the next 12 months, would get the franchise and then do more.

Apr 02 - again when W & B consulted users about their Winter 02/03 timetable

Apr 02 - Chris Gibb replied on the issue.

May 02 - it was incorporated into our twenty point "wish list" widely distributed to the bidders for the W & B franchise and others. Copied below.:

5. Earlier Westbound departure from Shrewsbury (Monday to Saturdays). Another long-standing issue. Currently from east of Machynlleth, Aberystwyth cannot be reached till c.1120, Barmouth c.1150 and Pwllheli c.1400. No commuting journeys can be made from Welshpool into Newtown either. A whole plethora of journey opportunities are effectively not available or unattractive.

As I stated at the AGM these bullet point are being fleshed out as SARPA "policy" so it is definitely something that will be pursued.

Many of you will ask why is it that this situation is allowed when there is so obviously a need for an earlier westbound departure. The answer lies in the PSR or Passenger Service Requirement, this is basically what the SRA franchises the TOC's to operate, the PSR for our line instructs the operator to run a train departing Shrewsbury no later than 0945. Therefore they are well "within the rules" with a 0935 departure. As many of you know my criticism with the PSR is that it is a political tool from the time of rail privatisation. The powers that be decided to put something in place to stop Private TOC's cutting back on what BR was running (to avoid political embarrassment): in all too many cases this was a blatant copy of the then BR timetable warts and all. If something was wrong it became frozen into the PSR. Unfortunately the SRA has clung on to this as a tool to manage the rail system, and tries to make out that it is a template on minimum levels of service, rather than acknowledge the many faults it contains. Often these PSR's were designed around the resources available to

the operator rather than passenger need as in our case, the threadbare nature of W & B resources mean they can't easily expand on what they already running.

A brief note about my comment that Chris Gibb was worried about the popularity of this service with traincrew. The background to this was back in October last year, Wales & West had suffered from train drivers being poached by other operators offering better terms and conditions (another wonderful thing brought on since privatisation: the same thing is behind the strikes by FNM in North Wales with their pay lagging behind other operators). His concern was that an extra "early turn" might make transferring to another operator more attractive to the traincrew involved - namely EWS who pay c£5k a yr more than ex Regional Railways TOC's. This reason has proved somewhat of a red herring as EWS has decreased its poaching activity following widespread criticism.

Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Line Liaison Committee Newtown: October

- Meeting poorly attended by local councillors. Chris Gibb (MD W & B), Tony O'Donovan (Line Manager) and Community Rail Officer David Williams attended, Railtrack absent.
- Very upbeat report from W & B. 17.%% increase in passengers on line this August & September, equivalent to 24,000 journeys per month. Reliability at unprecedented levels, punctuality improved. Station improvements continuing.
- A BTP officer is specifically to be assigned to Mid Wales.
- Crossing Keeper will be at Cilgwarn before Christmas, this will shave 2 minutes off Welshpool to Newtown time.
- CG still pushing for ERTMS to come to Cambrian, talk of using it as mechanism to install loops at Dovey Junction, Westbury and Caersws. Recognised that Dovey Junction viable only if timetable runs perfectly.
- To the councillors this new system, if it can be evaluated on the Cambrian, was presented as bringing jobs and other socio-economic benefits to the area, including in the longer term the much sought hourly service, and he was seeking the councils and councillors to lobby WAG, on the line that if WAG forked out for the difference between funding like for like replacement of the existing system and the cost of the new, progress was assured !!!!

Some Silly Arguments.

Seemingly having learnt nothing from the Bustritution debate of 1999: they're at it again. The anti rural railways brigade has been since last summer briefing to influence the agenda about the future of the railways. This has been generated from certain sections of the SRA and from government ministers. The theme is familiar: the rail industry is in a financial crisis (spiralling costs this time), a scapegoat is needed, turn to subsidised rural rail. In the early 1960's rail was in a crisis, the spiralling costs of the ill thought out 1955 modernisation plan and the industry being "unprofitable" in terms of beans that could be counted by bean counters anyway. They turned to an allegedly clever chap called Richard Beeching from ICI: his report thought that if you closed all the "rural branch lines" and so called duplicate main lines all would be well as the cancer would be cut out the system. This was duly done and the railways remained unprofitable, it was future BR Chairman that turned things round by tackling the real problems. There are clear parallels with the nonsense going on today; saving £10 Million a year from Wales and Borders subsidy whilst cutting services by a third is not going to turn around the West Coast Main line Upgrade debacle. Do these people ever learn?

Underneath are some of the accusations and statements made and SARPA's answer to them.

Spin, spin and more spin.

"Railways in Wales receive 13.5p subsidy for every passenger kilometre travelled compared to the UK average of 3.5p per kilometre".

"70% of all subsidy goes to loss making ex regional railway franchises".

"Rail is only really good at three things: city centre to city centre Intercity travel, transporting commuters in to London and moving bulk freight long distance".

"70% of all rail journeys are in the South East anyway"

Implying – All the above combine to say the same message that regional rail is expensive to the taxpayer, irrelevant and doesn't concentrate money on where it's most needed i.e. the South East.

Whilst largely factually correct these snippets are not quoted in context but instead used to try and spin a line, they are also pitched at putting one part of the rail system against another rather than concentrating on promoting the industry.

The reality- Wales and Border Trains receive £50 Million of government subsidy per annum at the moment. This is 6% of the total amount, the population served by Wales and Borders equates to just over 5% of the UK's population so in fact were about on a par with what we should get proportionally. Ex Network South East TOC's will get £184 million this year and Virgin's two franchises some £134 Million (source: SRA). So rural Wales is hardly hogging the budget. To put £50 Million in context it is only half the cost of the recent refurbishment of Manchester Piccadilly station and less than 2% of the money recently announced by government to widen a couple of stretches of motorway.

Yes it's true that rail is excellent at those three things listed above, however it doesn't mean that it's not good at other things! Rural railways for example can take freight off unsuitable twisting and narrow roads, transport passengers in greater safety than motor vehicles, be more easily upgraded to take extra traffic than constrained rural roads, relieve pressure on those roads, tackle social exclusion and provide positive multipliers on local economies that road doesn't give to name but a few good reasons.

Only 25% of the UK's population lives in the South East of England who happen to have an intact rail network with decent (in comparison to the rest of the UK) services. If the rest of the country had the same coverage of lines and intensity of services no doubt they would use rail as much. The rest of the UK has had Beeching and the rump of the lines left have been run on a shoestring for forty years. Therefore we do not use rail as much as south easterners because we've been denied the opportunity to use it. It's a situation not of our making that we didn't ask for.

The whole attack on rural railways ignores the context of the wider benefits to the economy brought by government support and the simple fact that some things in life need support from government to exist whether the Treasury likes it or not. If this principle were applied to other areas such as rural roads and other services, life outside of the big cities would collapse.

If we repeat a lie often enough people will believe it.

“Rail cannot effectively serve thin markets”

“Some routes would be better served by light rail and bus services”

Implied- railways are an inefficient method of transport outside of large population centres that can be replaced by other means.

The reality- The concept of bustitution was firmly knocked down in 1999: to raise it again so soon means that somebody really didn't pay attention to the debate and deserves to wear a dunce's cap. The thin markets bit is a new twist, however we can't but help think that the SRA's Nick Newton who drew it up got his speech mixed up and meant to say “rail has not been allowed to effectively serve.....” Unless somewhere in the depths of Eastern England the SRA has reopened lines and stations, reinstated passing loops and goods sidings and properly funded a true rail network and found it wanting to prove the validity of their statement then it should be dismissed. Please provide the evidence Mr Newton!

Simply put rail is not reaching it's true potential to serve regional markets as its not been allowed to do so. Make rail relevant and it will deliver, hold it back and it won't. Again this argument appears to be the classic case of confusing what the under funded privatised railway is doing at the moment and assuming that it is what rail is all about. Take one look at the roads even in Mid Wales and then say there is no demand for travel in rural areas, then take a look at what could be achieved if there was a properly funded and comprehensive rail network in Mid Wales. If rail is so ineffective why have passenger numbers on the Cambrian doubled since 1995?

Or borrow some old tired road lobby propaganda.

“Railways cannot replace the car as the car is now an essential necessity”.

Implied- that for a modern 21st Century lifestyle we all need cars as the nations infrastructure is built around car use that rail cannot duplicate or match.

The reality- No one claims that rail can replace the car except the road lobby as some pathetic excuse to justify their case by oversimplifying the argument into a black and white choice. Rail is one part of the solution to the nations transport crisis, there are many others. This argument ignores the use of buses, trams, cycling, walking and gradually changing our working patterns and lifestyles. Cars will still play a role but does every family really need two of them making unnecessary short journeys? And just how do the 30% of the population without access to a car cope? “Essential necessity”: probably not.

WELSHPOOL TO SHREWSBURY AN UPDATE—OCTOBER 1ST 2002

Roger Goodhew

Some changes have taken place since last I stood in the wet after dark at Welshpool station wondering whether the last train of the day to Shrewsbury would show up*. The timetable has been put on the west facing side of the display board so it can be read in the dark. Lighting comes from the tall street lamps at the adjacent roundabout. The yellow information box on the platform responds with a really helpful voice, which is well informed. Apparently it belongs to a real, live, human being based at

Machynlleth. The train conductor is helpful and willingly takes notes in order to correct a detail on the displayed timetable on Welshpool station. (The 2119 to Shrewsbury Mon-Fri *does* run). The train arrives within five minutes of the expected time.

So what else has changed?

The train is run by Wales & Borders Trains - which is associated with the Cardiff Railway Company Limited based in Fitzalan Road Cardiff. This company took over the operation of the Birmingham to Aberystwyth, to Chester and to Pwllheli passenger services in October 2001 - until a new franchise is let by the SRA (The service was formerly run by Central Trains based in Birmingham). Both Central and Wales & Borders are part of the National Express Group which is *one* of the four companies short-listed by the Strategic Rail Authority for the new franchise.

The *other three* short-listed companies are: Arriva, GB Trains / Connex, Serco / NedRail.

So what hasn't changed?

The pocket timetables still boast some of the smallest print in the country. Timetable F to Aberystwyth comes in at 5 point print for table headings, names, times and notes**. With 21% of the UK population over 60 (according to the 2001 Census) and reading eyesight known to deteriorate universally around 45 years of age, there could be something over a third of the potential adult passenger population who put aside this key travel aid.

The saga of the three lamps which need to be lit at the top of the ramp to the platform at Welshpool station rumbles on. Apparently a question of split responsibility is the problem - which goes back to the privatization process in the 90s when the station lease details were agreed between (the former) Rail-track Midland Zone and (the former operator) Central Trains. Let's hope the present incumbents can agree on how many people it takes to change the light bulbs on Welshpool station access ramp: Wales & Borders Trains (Cardiff based) and Network Rail Great Western Zone (Swindon based) -let's see what you can do!

There are many other sources of improvement

SARPA's 20 point wish list - which was issued at the AGM - forms the basis for substantive improvements in passenger service for which the new franchisees compete. The Association - through its links with neighbouring associations and user groups via the Shrewsbury Rail User Federation - seeks to achieve these substantive improvements.

Roger Goodhew

* see SARPA Newsletter No.18 April 2001: p.3 'Last Train to Salop'.

** compare with:

8 point for Virgin Route Timetables' names, times and notes 12 point for SARPA's Newsletter body text (a happy size), 20 point for Virgin's Route Timetables' table headings.

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

SARPA MONTHLY MEETINGS. 2003

We meet on a monthly basis in public and occasionally have guest speakers. We will be inviting the candidates for the forthcoming Assembly elections from all the parties to our March and April meetings.

All are welcome please come along and discuss your concerns with the committee and other members.

The venues and times are as follows: we meet where access by rail is practical.

January	Tuesday 7 th	Bell Hotel (Downstairs Function Room)	Newtown	1900
February	Tuesday 4 th	Pinewood Tavern (Upstairs Function Room)	Welshpool	1915
March	Saturday 1 st	Cambrian Hotel (Upstairs Function Room)	Aberystwyth	1130
April	Tuesday 1 st	Wynnstay Hotel (Back bar)	Machynlleth	1900
May	Tuesday 6 th	Library (Hobbs Room)	Shrewsbury	1930
June	Saturday 7 th	Railway Hotel	Borth	1115
July	Tuesday 1 st	Bell Hotel (Downstairs Function Room)	Newtown	1900
August	Tuesday 5 th	Red Lion	Caersws	1830
September	Saturday 6 th Also AGM	Wynnstay Hotel (Lloyd George Function Room)	Machynlleth	1315
October	Tuesday 7 th	Pinewood Tavern (Upstairs Function Room)	Welshpool	1915
November	Tuesday 4 th	Bell Hotel (Downstairs Function Room)	Newtown	1900
December	Saturday 6 th	Cambrian Hotel (Upstairs Function Room)	Aberystwyth	1130

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

OFFICERS OF THE ASSOCIATION

The current officers for the Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passenger Association (SARPA) are as follows:

Chairman: Gareth Marston: 64 Churchill Drive,
Barnfields, Newtown, Powys SY16 2LH. 01686-
625716. E-mail: tanygraig@breathemail.net

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, Shrop-
shire. SY3 8NE. Tel. 01743 358873.