

## AB&T: One Giant Step

SEN RUG is delighted to report that a funding package of £34m towards the re-opening of the Northumberland Line has now been announced. The money will allow completion of the preparatory works including land acquisition, detailed design work and some minor construction.

Over the years SEN RUG has worked closely with Northumberland County Council and other stakeholders, as well as ensuring the campaign has been prominent in both local and national media. SEN RUG Chair Dennis Fancett said:

“This announcement is fantastic news. It’s taken a long time coming, but we applaud both Northumberland County Council and the Government for this decision. It proves that campaigning really does work, as very few people were listening to us when we first put our ideas forward.”

SEN RUG wants to say a big thank you to everyone who has supported this campaign. Our members, and many other members of the public, have worked hard to keep the campaign in the public eye. Politicians from all parties, including Members of Parliament and Councillors, have lobbied both ministers and civil servants and they all deserve our thanks.

What comes next? The total cost of the project is estimated to be £166m and one of the first tasks for the County Council and Network Rail is to finalise the full business case for submission early in the Autumn. This should allow the Government to release the remaining funding required to complete the project.

The Northumberland Line will deliver many of the things that have been key parts of the SEN RUG campaign. We will be getting stations at Northumberland Park (Metro connection), Seaton Delaval, Newsham for Blyth, Bebside and Bedlington and a half-hourly service with a time from Ashington to Newcastle journey of around 35 minutes. SEN RUG will celebrate this huge milestone, and



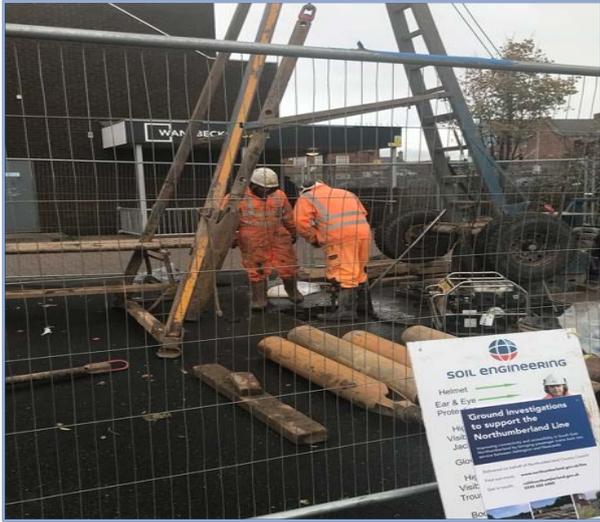
*Destination Ashington. Photo: John Brierley*

then we will continue to argue the case for extending the line to Newbiggin by the Sea and for a branch into the centre of Blyth.

Did SEN RUG make a difference? In a Facebook post Cllr Richard Wearmouth said “It’s huge progress for our county and on behalf of Northumberland county council I want to say a huge thank you to SEN RUG Chair Dennis Fancett and all members of the group who have lobbied to get to this point well done!”

# Groundworks Already Started

At long last we have boots on the ground. For the last few weeks drilling rigs have been gathering soil and rock samples. These cores are then tested to make sure that the ground



*The Hard Work Starts. Photo: Sally Milner*

will be able to support the foundations required for all of the new structures needed for our new passenger carrying railway. Any problems identified at this stage will inform the detailed design work that will be needed prior to construction. Holes are being drilled at more than 80 locations around the line, and in some places the drills will go even deeper to check on the possibility of mine workings that may need attention. Before these investigations started, the team had carried out extensive environmental surveys to ensure that their work wouldn't disturb the surrounding natural environment.

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SENRUG has a regularly updated website at [www.senrug.co.uk](http://www.senrug.co.uk) and lots more interesting material can be found on our Facebook pages at [www.facebook.com/SENRUG](https://www.facebook.com/SENRUG)

Our campaign started in July 2004 and by December 2005 we had the support of local MPs with an Early Day Motion debated in the Commons. In January 2007 the North East Assembly commissioned a report into the proposed phased re-opening of the line and an online petition saw the proposal debated in the House of Commons.

In June 2008 SENRUG organised a charter train to Ashington for stakeholders, politicians and the press.

In March 2009 the then Secretary of State for Transport visited and SENRUG presented the case for the re-opening to him. Support grew as ATOC published their 'Connecting Communities' report.

March 2010 saw all 3 parliamentary candidates for Wansbeck promise to support the scheme at a SENRUG hustings meeting. In November 2010 the scheme was included in Northumberland County Council's Local Transport Plan.

Network Rail started the first stage of their 'GRIP' process in June 2013 and by October 2016 Northumberland County Council set out an ambitious timescale that would have seen, if funding was available, trains running by early 2021.

In February 2019 the then Transport Secretary visited the line and expressed his support. By September 2019 Northumberland County Council had run their first public consultation and renamed it as The Northumberland line. In October 2019 it was included in DfT's Rail Network Enhancement Pipeline.

January 2020 saw Government allocating £1.5m to the development of the project. In May 2020 Northumberland County committed a further £10m to the project and work on the ground started.

Environmental surveys came first and we are now seeing an extensive programme to test the ground conditions in places where new structures would be required.

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# Rolling Stock News

When SENRUG chartered a train back in 2008 to demonstrate that it was quite possible to run passenger services from Ashington to Newcastle, the lineside was well populated by trainspotters and photographers. They saw a humble class 156 DMU and many of us assumed that this type of stock would be used when the line re-opened permanently. However, things might be changing. The Railways have a target of removing diesel from the passenger network by 2040. Network Rail has published a provisional plan to achieve these targets. They have looked at overhead electrification, battery powered trains, and the new technology of hydrogen fuel cells. They have also produced a series of maps



*New Stock for the Isle of Wight. Photo: VivaRail*

setting out the options over all of England and Wales. What is interesting is that their map of the North East shows the Northumberland Line as a candidate for electrification on the basis that it will still be used for freight and could be used as a diversionary route for the ECML. However, it seems likely that electrification might be some distance into the future and so an interim solution will be needed.

What does this mean for the rolling stock that might be used on our new line? Network Rail discuss a range of options including trains using battery power, with units being recharged whilst running on the ECML section of the route. We know that a number of companies, including VivaRail, are offering units that make use of this system and so we

may well not be seeing elderly and noisy diesels running along the line but instead we could be looking forward to travelling on quiet, green electric power.

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## Morpeth Station



*A new look Morpeth Station. Photo: Dave Shaw*

Building work has now been completed and the new ticket office is open. The Greater Morpeth Development Trust has done a great job. As well as the much better environment in and around the station, and the improvements in parking provision, we are pleased to say that the long SENRUG campaign for afternoon access to the station toilet and waiting room has been successful. The station building is now open to welcome passengers from 06:30 – 17:30 on weekdays and 06:30 to 13:00 on Saturdays. However, as yet the Station buffet has not opened - perhaps too much to hope for during the current pandemic - but will hopefully arrive once both the rail and hospitality industries return to normal.

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## Evening Car Parking

The council car park at Morpeth Station is now free after 6 pm following SENRUG 's negotiations with the Council.

Now is the time to join SENRUG and make sure your voice is heard as we work to improve rail services within the area and to destinations beyond. Go to the SENRUG website [www.senrug.co.uk](http://www.senrug.co.uk) and click on the 'join' button. It only costs £5 a year and you can pay by card or download the form and post it to us along with a cheque.

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# Public transport: the next 15 years

The draft of the North East Transport Plan 2021 – 2035 was published a few months to allow for public comments. The plan covering Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, and County Durham is important to us all. It includes all of the different ways we get around our region with sections on walking and cycling, buses and ferries, private transport, rail and metro. The plan doesn't just stop at the boundaries of the North East but also looks at how we connect with the rest of the world. Not everything that is in the plan will happen unless funding becomes available and the figure of £6.1bn has been quoted for the whole of the region.

All 50+ pages are worth reading but SENRUG has taken a particular interest in the Rail and Metro section. The draft plan is available at [www.transportnortheast.gov.uk/have-your-say/](http://www.transportnortheast.gov.uk/have-your-say/) and the SENRUG comments are on our website [www.senrug.co.uk](http://www.senrug.co.uk) in the documents we have issued section.

There is a great potential for rail services in Northumberland. If the trains went where people want, at a time they want to go, at a price they can afford, and if services are clean, safe, secure and easy to understand, people will use trains for work, shopping and leisure. We've welcomed the proposals to re-open the Northumberland Line but have argued that it should be extended to both Newbiggin by the Sea and Blyth Town Centre. We also say that the line from Morpeth to Bedlington should be re-opened by extending Hexham – Morpeth trains on to Choppington and Bedlington. This would help with the regeneration of both Choppington and Scotland Gate and would offer a whole range of new links from South East Northumberland. Along with an enhanced service north of Morpeth (see article on this page) this would provide a half hourly service between Cramlington and Newcastle. We also argue that it is vital that the whole issue of interchange with the Metro service at both Northumberland Park and Manors is properly thought through. People in

South East Northumberland need good access to the jobs that are available at, for example, the Cobalt Business Park. We've made a number of proposals to improve the rail infrastructure aimed at both making the system more resilient and more passenger friendly. Included in this category are our proposals to move Cramlington Station, tweak the design for Northumberland Park, and integrate the Mainline and Metro stations at Manors. To make sure that all stations are 'passenger friendly' we've proposed a set of minimum standards that include step free access, better signage, and greatly improved passenger information. We've given thought to improving access to the Airport from both the South East and North of the County as well as saying that the Metro should be extended to Ponteland. We've also argued for much better integration with bus services that would include interchangeable tickets.

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## North of Morpeth

Extending the Newcastle to Morpeth local service on to Berwick, and running trains hourly, has been a SENRUG aspiration for some time. Such a service would better serve north Northumberland with new stations at locations such as Belford, provide a commuter and leisure rail service throughout the day to Pegswood, Widdrington, Acklington and



*The evening train arrives at Widdrington. Photo: Dave Shaw*

Chathill, and offer improved connectivity between the key market towns of Morpeth, Alnmouth and Berwick. SENRUG drew up a specification for an initial Feasibility Study and got various rail consultancy firms to tender for it, with Systra offering the best proposal. After a few unsuccessful attempts to obtain funding

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for the Feasibility Study, in May 2019, SENRUG suggested to both Northern and the County Council they could each fund 49% of the study. The study was finally commissioned in November 2019. SENRUG also provided a 2% contribution, which was funded by Railfuture.

The final Report was received in June 2020 and was extremely positive, demonstrating there is timetable space on the line for an hourly service each way, provided faster electric trains are used. The Report also investigated 3 potential new stations. Beal was found to be technically complex and thus expensive, so unlikely to be justified on the basis of the benefit it would bring initially. Warkworth, whilst easier to construct, was considered to be too close to Acklington to create sufficient benefit, but provisional findings for Belford are that it is both technically feasible and commercially viable.

Northumberland County Council decided it would take the proposals forward and therefore made 2 separate applications to the DfT "Restoring Your Railways" Fund - one for the service itself and one for the new station at Belford. The Council also submitted a 3rd application for a new station at Gilsland, a campaign led by our colleagues in the Tyne Valley.

At time of writing the DfT has not immediately accepted the Berwick and Belford



Chathill Station. Photo: Dave Shaw

applications, but has asked the Council for more details on both proposals, particularly the station at Belford which is of course dependant on the service itself running. The Council has advised SENRUG they are committed to providing this information as

quickly as possible and are progressing the scheme.

Meanwhile, LNER are believed to be seeking more paths to Edinburgh. SENRUG believes this should be opposed, until it can be demonstrated such paths can be provided in addition to the paths required for the local service. SENRUG's aspiration is for 2 local services per hour between Newcastle and Morpeth (thus delivering 2 trains per hour each way at Cramlington). The first would be the Newcastle - Berwick electric service, which could be extended south to a new station at Team Valley, whilst the second would be for the Hexham - Morpeth service which would then be extended on to a new station at Choppington and then to terminate at Bedlington, connecting with the Northumberland Line.

The Council are of course very busy with the Northumberland Line work at the moment which following years of SENRUG campaigning is deservedly their top public transport priority. However, SENRUG understands the Morpeth - Berwick service is very much the next priority and we look forward to further developments on this over the next few months.

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## Franchising Terminates Here

*"The 19:99 experiment to franchising terminates here. All change, please. All change. For details of onward connections please consult DfT staff".* Or at least words to that affect. The DfT has finally announced franchising is no more. The announcement was not unexpected. SENRUG, via Railfuture, had contributed to The Williams Review, and of course here on the East Coast Main Line, we have experienced the successive financial failure of each of the 3 franchisees (Sea Containers / GNER, National Express and Stagecoach / Virgin) who had won competitions to run the line by bidding more than they could afford. But we were waiting to

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hear what would replace it. Service contracts were what was expected, and in fact due to the COVID crisis, we had already slipped into that through government support to the rail industry during a time of plummeting passenger numbers. Instead of a final decision the DfT has merely announced the system of service contracts will now continue. We are advised greater co-operation between operators can now be expected. Could that be of benefit to Cramlington? Might it deliver a morning service to Newcastle before the current first arrival of 08:22? SENRUG will certainly campaign for that.

And what of open access operators – in particular East Coast Trains (from FirstGroup) who are due to start their new service from Morpeth next year. We've noted the difficulties that both Hull Trains and Grand Central are in as a result of the COVID crisis, with Grand Central withdrawing their plans for a Blackpool service completely. East Coast Trains have however assured SENRUG their plans are on track. Crew recruitment is now complete and training underway at their offices near Newcastle. East Coast Trains plan to offer a "High Quality – Low Fare" service between London and Edinburgh. The service will only offer standard class but trains will be equipped with a buffet. Early reports suggested an average fare as low as £25.

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## Don't Trash Our Railways!

The dramatic loss of passengers during the COVID crisis has done a lot of damage to the rail industry. Whilst the financial damage has been mitigated by substantial increases in financial support from government, the long-term picture is much more challenging as evidenced by the recently published annual 'RAC Report on Motoring'. They say that attitudes to driving versus public transport have been put back by two decades - with the numbers saying they would use their cars less if public transport was better falling from 57% to 43%. This change in attitude is reflected in the fact that the fall in public transport use in recent months has been much greater than

the fall in car usage. Our question is simple. How do we revive public transport?

Firstly, let's look at the issue of safety because people won't come back to the railways unless they feel safe. A recent study by our own Rail



*Is the Government trying to drive these people back into their cars? Photo Trevor Watson*

Safety and Standards Board suggests that the risk of catching the virus on an hour-long train journey, where every other seat is occupied, is less than 0.01%. Maintaining this low level of risk obviously depends on the behaviour of both operators and passengers. All of our local operators have developed clear policies and practices aimed at keeping their trains clean and disinfected. Modern trains are designed to keep the air we breathe on trains both fresh and virus free. All we have to do is keep our hands sanitised and wear masks. How we behave on train journeys is also of vital importance to railway workers. The Rail Maritime and Transport Union has recently been drawing our attention to the dangers that their members face. We can help them by making sure that we follow the rules and support them when they challenge what they see as dangerous working practices.

Transport Focus provides us with some interesting research about the problems that the bus industry is facing. They say that 81% of people who identify as bus users feel safe on buses, but that less than 50% of people who don't use buses say they would feel safe. The whole public transport industry needs to look hard at what the public seem to be saying. In particular operators need to recognise that they have to do the right thing **and** be seen to be doing so. The message needs to get out to all potential passengers. The good news that

public transport is safe needs to be headline news.

The problem doesn't stop once people see that public transport is safe. Many commentators are suggesting that the 'new normal' will include some big changes to our working lives. More people may work from home for at least part of the week. There may be fewer face to face meetings with much more use being made of video conferencing. All of this suggests that some, hopefully only a small part, of the traditional traffic might be lost for good. What new opportunities are there to replace these 'lost' passengers?

On a national level there may well be trend towards 'sustainable' travel with reports (*Guardian 19<sup>th</sup> November 2020*) of new companies being set up to offer holidays that are closer to home, avoid air travel, allow us to experience nature and support local businesses. The report goes on to talk about an increased demand for rail-based holidays being reported by a number of long-established holiday companies. SENRUG has played a small part in this movement with our articles on local days out by rail as well as our lobbying to extend the boundaries of local rover tickets to include Cramlington and Morpeth. The message is simple. There is a market out there if the operators want to find it and it has been done in the past. Ron Cotton, a famous Liverpool Area Manager in the days of British Rail, introduced a range of cheap fares for off-peak travel between Liverpool and London. These trains were filled to overflowing. Posted to the Settle – Carlisle line ahead of its impending closure he put resources into both improving the service and marketing it to a wide range of potential users. The line was saved and still prospers.

SENRUG would like to thank Ashington Town Council, Blyth Town Council, Cramlington Town Council, East Bedlington Parish Council, Pegswood Parish Council, Seaton Valley Community Council and West Bedlington Town Council for their donations towards the cost of funding our website and printing our newsletters up to 2024.

## Freight on the AB&T

In all the excitement about the re-opening the railway to passenger services it is easy to forget that the track and much of the infrastructure has only survived since 1964 because of freight traffic. Up until the era of



*Biomass on the way to Lynemouth. Photo: Dave Shaw*

pit closures the line was busy with coal traffic. Many of the collieries had their own railway systems that fed traffic onto the Blyth and Tyne. The line even had its own engines and rolling stock until the motive power depot at Cambois closed in 1994. What is left today? There are three main freight flows on the line at present. Alumina is imported through the Port of Blyth and then carried by train to the smelter near Fort William. Biomass is imported through the Port of Tyne and then shuttled to the power station at Lynemouth. Coal, and other bulk products, are imported through the Port of Blyth. Rail carries some of this traffic on to Teesside and Yorkshire. What of the future? We know that the Furnace Way sidings are being restored to allow for freight movements on the new railway. We think that there may be new opportunities for freight services to use the line – especially if we are successful in getting the section between Ashington and Butterwell re-opened with a link to the East Coast Main Line. This is why SENRUG believes that provision must be made for the eventual doubling of the single track section between Northumberland Park and Newsham.

# Go West Young Man!

## Dave Shaw travels to the West from Hexham.

Our Tyne Valley Rover ticket has brought us from Newcastle and now it is time to leave Hexham and head west. A few moments into our journey and we can see, on the right, the remains of the piers that once carried a bridge for the line that ran up to Kielder and then on to join the Waverley Line at Riccarton Junction. The line closed in 1958 because the bridge was in poor condition and would have cost too much to repair. On the left was the line that ran to Allendale – closed in 1950.

At Haydon Bridge the literary buffs amongst you will want to pay homage to Phillip Larkin. The one time Poet Laureate was a frequent visitor, and you'll find a blue plaque in his honour at 1A Ratcliffe Road. John Martin, the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century artist was born in the town and is remembered by a plaque on the wall of the General Havelock Inn. Martin painted a sign for the pub that would now be worth over a million pounds. The current version is just a replica. Next stop of this journey is Haltwhistle, said to be the 'Centre of Great Britain'. If you wanted to balance a cardboard cut-out of a map of Great Britain on a pin, and who wouldn't want to try this out,



Haltwhistle Signal Box. A Grade Two listed building. Photo: Dave Shaw

locals say that you'd find that the balance point was the centre of the town, and many local businesses have adopted the title as part of their name. The railway to Alston headed south from the station until it was closed in 1976. The good news is that the South Tynedale Railway are rebuilding the line. Their narrow gauge line starts in Alston and has got as far north as Slaggyford and is well worth a

visit. Sadly, there are few buses and you may need to find your own way. However, a local bus service, in the form of the AD 122, can take us from Haltwhistle to Hadrians Wall during the summer. Back at the station we wait for the service to Brampton. Whilst waiting cast a glance at the signal box. In use until 1983 it sits amongst a complex of railway historical buildings including water tower and crane, station buildings, and passenger shelters. Several of these are now Grade II



Passing the old Gilsland Station. Photo: Dave Shaw

listed and are home to a number of small businesses and an informative heritage centre. In an ideal world our next stop would be at Gilsland. A few paces from the old station are walks and cycleways to help visitors explore the Wall and visit the local teasops. We are only a few miles from the 'Debateable Lands' and the gruesome violence at the time of the Reivers. Sir Walter Scott romanticised this period and visited Gilsland, getting engaged at the Popping Stone. The station was closed in 1967 but a local campaign aims to see it reopened. Until this happens community volunteers are running a connecting service to the village, using a hybrid electric car, from either Brampton or Haltwhistle. At Brampton leave the train to visit Lanercost Priory via a walk along Quarry Beck and finishing with refreshments from the Priory tea-room.

Next Time: Carlisle for a Cathedral, Castle, and Curse and the starting point for many more days out.