



Guest Opinion

Richard Burningham, Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership

Community Railways are on a roll

The future of rural railways in Britain looked bleak in the 1960s, in the wake of the Beeching report. Half a century later, after more threatened closures had been happily avoided, the story is very different. Community Railways have transformed many local lines away from the big cities, and one pioneer of the movement, **Richard Burningham**, believes there is much more to come.

BACK in June 2000, the only Cornish branch line with a Sunday service was the 7.5km route between Bere Alston and Gunnislake – and that was a chartered service paid for by Devon and other local authorities.

In June this year, just sixteen years later, all the Cornish branches had Sunday trains. Every line now has trains on Sundays between Easter and October and all except the Looe line have them throughout the year. They are all part of the GWR franchise.

In fact, pretty much every branch line in Devon and Cornwall now has its best ever train service – yes, better than the halcyon days of the old GWR, Southern and low car ownership.

They are also busier than they have been for decades and some, like Falmouth, St Ives and Barnstaple, are probably busier than ever before.

Back in 2001, 199,000 journeys were recorded on the Barnstaple ‘Tarka Line’. The figure for 2015 was 666,000, an increase of 234 per cent.

The Falmouth ‘Maritime Line’ saw 185,000 journeys in 2001. Last year, thanks to the restored passing loop at Penryn and 2009 service improvements but also to a lot of promotion and development over the years, the figure was 692,000, up 274 per cent.

A similar story can be told around the country – at Matlock, Severn Beach, Sheringham, Whitby and Clitheroe – and it’s not happened by chance.

Back in 1991 Britain’s first rail partnership was founded, the one I now run, the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership in Plymouth. This was a ground breaking initiative by, among others, Regional Railways, Devon and Cornwall County Councils and Polytechnic South West (now Plymouth University), who agreed to host it.

The main focus of the new partnership was to promote branch line services, particularly for leisure trips.

Meanwhile, in Huddersfield, events in Plymouth had set academic, author (and former Blackburn BR guard) Paul Salveson thinking. He and others established the Penistone Line Partnership in 1993 with its main theme being links between the railway and the community. This was the country’s first Community Rail Partnership.

Others followed around the country, and Paul set up what became ACoRP –



the Association of Community Rail Partnerships – in 1997.

ACoRP’s founding led quickly to much sharing of ideas and experiences. The two pioneer partnerships expanded their roles. Here in Devon and Cornwall the number of lines included in the partnership grew from two in 1991 to five in 1996 and nine now.

Our aspirations developed into working to encourage use of branch lines at all times and seeking to improve the service too. A big part of community rail is people plugging away politely and taking what opportunities they can to achieve what they want to achieve.

The Sunday service story here, and much else, was helped massively by the emergence of new funding around 2000, particularly the Countryside Agency’s Rural Transport Partnership Fund.

This allowed ACoRP and our partnership to employ more staff. It funded more trains, better stations, promotions, work with the community and much more.

All the Devon & Cornwall train service improvements introduced thanks to this funding proved themselves and are now part of the Great Western Railway franchise.

With more trains, wider promotion and much positive focus on the branch lines, Richard Bowker, then head of the Strategic Rail Authority, decided that the lessons learned already should be spread far and wide and that a concerted, united effort should be made to make the most of Britain’s regional and rural network.

He gave one of his executive directors, Chris Austin, the task of writing a Community Rail Strategy, working

“A big part of community rail is people plugging away politely”

closely with Paul Salveson, who was by now general manager at ACoRP.

The Strategy was adopted by the Government in 2004 and has remained Government policy ever since, with strong cross party support and a lot of Ministerial engagement.

It was revised in 2007 and its current aims are increasing ridership, freight use and revenue, controlling and managing costs, greater involvement of the local community and enabling local rail to play a larger role in economic and social regeneration.

When the SRA was abolished in 2006, a Community Rail team was established at the Department for Transport. Lines and services began to be designated as ‘Community Rail’, which heightened their status and that of the community rail movement, particularly within the different arms of the rail industry.

Support for community rail and the Partnerships began to be written into franchises – a huge factor.

All recent franchise deals have included increased support for community rail, with the new Northern franchise being particularly significant. Last year’s Direct Award to Great Western Railway sees an increase in funding to ourselves and the four other GWR CRPs.

In 2015, the DfT and ACoRP commissioned a further report, ‘The Value of Community Rail Partnerships’.

This showed that CRPs pay for themselves, adding economic, social and environmental value. Passenger use on community rail lines has grown by an additional 2.8 per cent each year.

It found that around 3,200 rail volunteers work 250,000 hours a year helping to improve stations and reduce vandalism, providing a financial value of £3.4 million annually.

Things have come a long way for CRPs and the lines we work on.

We do a lot of work promoting use of the branch lines (it’s still our core job here in Plymouth) but we are able to do more than the founders could have ever imagined, using traditional outlets and ones that simply didn’t exist in 1991 (such as our Facebook page ‘greatscenicrailways’).

In addition to that we do much work with schools and community groups, run a Summer ticket office at Looe and an information point at Liskeard, hold local branch line forums and organise events such as our flagship ‘Munchtime Express’ where on Tuesdays in November various Looe restaurants offer passengers sample dishes on a lunchtime train, all for the price of a ticket.

We also run Carnet ticketing in the Tamar Valley (Gunnislake) and Mid Devon (Copplestone).

Carnets are books of ten discounted singles between branch stations and Plymouth or Exeter respectively, sold through local shops. Tamar Valley Line Carnets now account for around a fifth of the journeys made on the Gunnislake branch.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the help and support of the rail industry from platform and cab to the boardroom.

GWR managing director Mark Hopwood is a champion of community rail, and I know from my colleagues in CRPs around the country that many of his counterparts are too.

Similarly it wouldn’t have been possible without the long term, consistent support of many local authorities, in our case especially Devon, Cornwall and Plymouth. Their support for our partnership is only part of their agenda for improving and making the most of their local rail network.

This has seen four stations open in Devon since 1991 and Cornwall lead schemes such as the transformative Penryn passing loop – with much more to come in the next three years.

As with the rail network as a whole, Britain’s community railways have come a long way since the 1990s. Building on the progress made over these years and with support being included in new franchises, I believe that community rail is on a roll.

Long may that continue.