

Borders Line construction work gets under way

by Arthur Allan

The skirl of bagpipes marked the start of work to open up the Scottish Borders to rail passengers for the first time in more 40 years.

The musical celebration mirrored the closure of the Borders line under the Beeching cuts – a lone piper was also present to see off the last train in 1969.

The start of utility works last month means there is no turning back on the restoration project, whose future has been shrouded in doubt since the economic downturn.

MSPs, concerned that only part of the line might ever be built, inserted a clause in the act. This means that as soon as work began, the Scottish government was committed to finishing the project in its entirety, from Edinburgh to Tweedbank, within five years.

The Borders is currently the only region of Britain without passenger trains. Scottish transport minister Stewart Stevenson predicted the railway would 'act as a catalyst for economic growth right across southern Scotland'.

Colin Howden, of sustainable transport group Transform Scotland, said the closure of the route had been one of the worst disasters of the Beeching axe.

'We expect the new Borders railway to well out-perform current traffic forecasts, just like other recent Scottish rail re-openings.'

The main construction contractor will be appointed later this year. The £230m scheme is scheduled for completion in 2014.

In the same week, Network Rail laid the first tracks on the new

15-mile Airdrie to Bathgate link in Scotland's central belt. The tracks will link with the existing Bathgate-Edinburgh and Airdrie-Glasgow lines to create a new route between the two cities.

Trains are due to be running on the new line by December. Operator ScotRail's plan to run them on a driver-only basis has been the subject of three one-day strikes by the RMT in recent weeks. ScotRail has kept at least 90 per cent of trains running.

● arthur.allan@railpro.co.uk

Hampshire freight line could see passenger services

A new Community Rail Partnership is being set up with the aim of re-introducing passenger trains on the freight-only Waterside Line between Totton and Hythe near Southampton.

The route is currently used only rarely and serves the military port at Marchwood. The last passenger train was in 1966.

A feasibility study is to be commissioned, funded largely by Hampshire County Council. It will examine the costs and benefits of re-opening the line, including infrastructure improvements. It will recommend the level of service that could be provided and consider new or re-located stations. It will also evaluate the likely number of passengers, environmental and social benefits.

Hampshire County Council cabinet member Mel Kendal said: 'The outstanding results of the two existing Community Rail Partnerships in Hampshire, Lymington to Brockenhurst and Three Rivers, show how local support for rail lines can be harnessed for the benefit of whole communities.'

At present, commuter traffic from the western side of Southampton Water uses the congested, mainly single carriageway A326. There is also a passenger ferry from Hythe to Town Quay.

Last June, Atoc's report, *Connecting Communities*, identified 30 disused or freight-only lines with the potential to make a worthwhile contribution to the economy. The Waterside Line topped the list with the most positive cost: benefit ratio.



Edinburgh tries to break deadlock on trams dispute

Bosses of Edinburgh's troubled tram scheme have reacted angrily to the lead contractor's prediction of a further long delay to completion.

Bilfinger Berger has told the Edinburgh Trams Board that the project – currently due to be up and running in mid-2012 – cannot be finished till January 2014.

The board says its own specially commissioned audits show this to be untrue. It says

the proposed delay is 'entirely unacceptable'.

Board chairman David Mackay said: 'My concerns and those of my fellow directors are for the people of Edinburgh, who have continued to suffer from these seemingly endless delays.'

He also hit out at an 'unqualified increase in cost' proposed by the contractor, believed to be around an extra £100m on top of the £545m

budget. The board excluded CAF, which is building the tram vehicles, from its criticisms.

A bitter contractual dispute has been unresolved since last summer. Tram tracks have been laid on the city's main thoroughfare, Princes Street, but work on a large remaining section has stalled.

Richard Jeffrey, head of the city's tram firm TIE, said he was 'examining all options' to break the deadlock.