

Passengers take picturesque route but branch line work still needed

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IT'S one of the most picturesque 22 miles of railway in the country....

That's what I was told about 30 seconds after taking my seat on the single carriage train at Newquay Railway Station.

Quite a bold statement to make, especially when you think of all the picturesque journeys in the UK.

But, shortly after the train leaves the station, I see why my guide, Geoff Mason-Brown, press spokesman for support group Friends of The Atlantic Coastline (FOCAL), was so passionate about the cause.

Leaving behind the less-than-glamorous view of Newquay's hideous 1960s' police headquarters, the train is soon trundling across the spectacular Trenance Viaduct, peering down over the picturesque gardens and busy, bustling Newquay.

A minute later and we were gazing at rolling green fields.

I instantly questioned why so many people would choose to take their cars to work instead of relaxing on the train. What better way to arrive at work than an unwinding train journey, looking out over beautiful countryside? And I was soon told: the message is getting out there.

Sitting next to me is Stuart McLay, First Great Western's East Cornwall station manager.

Increase

He tells me the latest figures have shown a marked increase in passenger numbers.

"We are up by 57% on last year's numbers, and that's only up to September 17," he says.

"We are only 1,000 short of the historical maximum number of passengers (in 2004) since records began in 2001. So, we are looking at our busiest year for nine years."

The jump in numbers has been down to FOCAL's persistence in calling for more trains. Seven now run daily compared with the four which were running this time last year.

Following the group's calls, First Great Western agreed to increase the service, with more trains now operating to allow commuters to get into work before 9am.

But, before any further train services are sanctioned, a host of works are needed to make it possible.

"It currently takes an hour-and-a-half for a train to get from one point to the end of the line and back again and nothing can go on the line until it has reached that point," said Geoff.

"St Columb Road station is one area where a new passing loop could be constructed, and this would allow more trains on the line."

After passing through St Columb Road, Geoff points out one of several key landmarks on the journey, Castle-an-Dinas, the ancient hill-top monument, jut outside St Columb Major.

"There are so many key features on this journey," says Geoff. His point hits home when, within

30 seconds, we are moving across Goss Moor.

Operator First Great Western (FGW) is backing the branch line, knowing full well that it is actually losing money. "It's a real loss leader for them," adds Geoff. "But they have been very good to us and when we have asked for more trains they have given them to us."

It is estimated that just one unit costs FGW £100,000 a year to run.

My other guide on our journey, FOCAL's vice-chairman Jim Cleare, adds: "You will need an awful lot of £3.90 return tickets to pay for just one train." And he's right, especially when you consider FGW only gets a percentage of the ticket price.

Another major issue for the group is the speed of the trains, with a 35mph limit on the track hampering efforts to reduce journey times.

As the train continues, we pass several level crossings, some of which need to be manually operated by the train driver, again requiring a stop and adding to the length of the journey.

Some sections have to be passed at walking pace, including a small bridge in the Luxulyan Valley.

Hub

But if the Government gets its way, the branch line could become a public transport hub for the Newquay, St Austell and Clay Country areas.

Bugle Station is one of the intermediate stops that could be transformed, if the eco-town proposals get the green light.

"There is a lot of room to improve the station," says Geoff, pointing out the grassed area behind the platform.

"That is going to become a car park and new disabled access will be added to allow those in wheelchairs to get onto the station.

"If the eco-town gets the go-ahead, this station will serve potentially thousands more people."

It's not just Bugle that could be revamped. Cornwall Council, along with Network Rail and FGW are discussing the potential for a park and ride scheme on the outskirts of Newquay, on land adjacent to Hendra Holiday Park.

And as our journey comes to an end at Par station, having meandered our way through the lush Luxulyan Valley, Geoff explains another possible development for the future.

Stepping off the train, just metres from the main line, the potential for a direct Newquay to Falmouth service is obvious.

"All the train would have to do is go back out of Par Station the way it came and go onto the main line. There wouldn't need to be any works carried out... it's all there," says Geoff.

"But it's a real chicken and egg situation. What comes first, more passengers to justify more trains, or more frequent trains to encourage more passengers?"

For more information, please go to www.focal.org.uk or to www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk



Lady Mary Holborow, Lord Lieutenant of Cornwall and patron of the FOCAL group, aboard one of the trains.

