

How Can the Club's Areas Achieve More?

Jeff Vinter discusses ways in which the club might be able to increase its level of service to members at a local level.

The committee has been concerned for some time that the club's performance in its areas is very variable. It suspects that this accounts for some of our new members lapsing one or two years after joining, so the question arises: 'What can we do to improve the situation?'

To answer this, I would like to take a little diversion through my personal history. My interest in railways comes through my family – on my father's side, I have railway ancestors going back to 1845 – but it was university that provided the big 'kick start'. I read History at Exeter but went up alone since my school propelled my closest friends to Oxford and Cambridge, thus making my new social life an empty canvas. Fortunately, within a month, I spotted a poster advertising a brake van trip over the then freight-only branch line from Tiverton Junction to Hemyock. I paid my 25p annual subscription to EURS (the Exeter University Railway Society), then my £8 fare, and was instantly hooked on exploring railway byways.

During my three years in EURS, we staged a wide variety of events which may provide useful ideas as to what Railway Ramblers could offer in its fourth decade. The annual brake van trip was the highlight of our year, but it wasn't cheap – BR's Western Region charged £50 for five students to travel with the guard, when the day return from Exeter to Paddington was just £4! Nowadays, it is interesting to see that brake van trips have re-appeared on a number of preserved railways, such as the Bodmin & Wenford and the Swindon & Cricklade. Their prices are very reasonable, and both of these railways have good trackbed walks nearby.

We also used the normal passenger railway to explore the west country, Looe being a popular destination at any time of the year. We used to walk along the coastal footpath to Polperro and then come back on the local bus, which was often an interesting third or fourth hand vehicle operated by some small local firm – a real treat for anyone interested in old buses as well as railways. These were essentially walks *from* the railway, or between stations, which combined our interest in railways with some healthy exercise and the chance to go exploring.

EURS walked many disused lines, for the great wave of Beeching cuts in the area was still a recent memory. Many of the lines had not been sold off or broken up as now, so it was easy to walk one way and travel back on the rail replacement bus. (Within a decade, many replacement bus services, lacking the legal protection of the former railway, disappeared.) In this manner, we walked branch lines such as Axminster-Lyme Regis, Bridport-West Bay, and Barnstaple-Ilfracombe. Obviously, we cannot explore so freely now, at least not without much research and negotiation, but there have never been more railway paths in the UK, and the number is still rising.

A few of the closed lines that were more distant from Exeter, such as the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway and the famous Somerset & Dorset route, became fragmented fairly quickly. To tackle these, we used to hire the Guild of Students' minibus and visit key sites along the way. In the case of the S&D, this meant starting at Bath Green Park and working southwards. We could cover half of the line in a day, i.e. Bath-Templecombe or Templecombe-Bournemouth, the object being to visit as many of the stations as possible. (Nowadays, with so many stations

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gone, we would need to visit surviving viaducts and tunnels as well.) EURS also used to stage other events, such as film shows by local railway photographers (Peter Gray was a firm favourite) or social events, such as a beer and skittles evening or a formal Christmas dinner. The Yorkshire and Eastern areas stage very popular social events over the festive season, while for a few years the Southern Area used to stage a popular December brewery tour.

Anyone reading this account will recognise that this account of life in EURS bears no small resemblance to what the club's more active areas get up to, although nowadays there are a number of 'extras' that can be added to the list of ingredients. Geoff Sargeant was a pioneer of exploring the occasional canal or Roman road, both significant features in the British countryside (just like our stock of disused railways), while Phil Wood introduced the idea of walking alongside operational lines when steam specials were running; Phil was able to do this during the 1980s and 1990s when steam specials were operated on the main line from Liverpool Street to Cambridge. In the club's Southern Area, we tried something similar last September by walking from Harman's Cross to Corfe Castle while the Swanage Railway was staging its Autumn Steam Fayre. Of course, in addition to 'normal' railways, there are thousands of miles of old tramway which repay exploration, although these tend to be focussed on specific areas where mineral extraction was a major industry in the 19th century or earlier. Thus the west country, the north east and much of Wales benefit greatly from this walking resource, while the 'garden of England' is relatively impoverished. I realise that some members may be rather 'tramway-averse', but our tramways include some amazing features. Bob Prigg knows this all too well, having explored recently a tramway in the Welsh mountains which includes an incline with a gradient rising to 1-in-1. (Yes, you did read that correctly: it has a gradient of 1-in-1, and its safety record was truly appalling.)

The principal problem with walking old railways as opposed to normal public rights of way is that the stock of routes is thinly spread, which requires people to travel considerable distances. For members who enjoyed family day trips as children, this may not be a problem, although it is a serious barrier to someone living in, say, Wootton Bassett or Stanhope who doesn't want to travel more than 7-10 miles for a day's walking. Sneaking in the odd walk along a canal or Roman road will help, but it does not increase the stock of available routes by much. It is a given, then, that railway ramblers need to be prepared to travel. However, travel is expensive, with our rail fares being the highest in Europe – even after the much vaunted simplification of the fares structure a year or so ago. Some bus fares, especially in more the affluent parts of the country, can make one's eyes water as well.

Members can get around this by sharing lifts, but how do we enable them to get in touch in the first place? The Data Protection Act means that we cannot just publish addresses – but we do offer free access to our message board using the username and password that are published in every edition of this magazine. (Incidentally, the username and password are changed every three months to ensure that this service remains accessible only to paid-up members.)

The club's experience suggests that local activities are most successful when a small number of members decide to set up an area group. This has worked very effectively in the South and Yorkshire areas, to name just two, but what is noticeable is that these groups operate in regions of concentrated population. The situation is very different, for example, in the South

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West, Scotland and much of Wales, where the club has a small number of members spread thinly over a very wide area.

This problem can be overcome, but it takes persistence. In the 1980s, I was the club's South Western Area Organiser and ran eight walks per year between March and October, thus taking advantage of the longer days and, just occasionally, some good weather. (I have an unfortunate reputation as a rain-bringer.) Since I am interested in old railways and exploring the countryside, I was not overly distressed to attract only 3 or 4 walkers on some events. However, over time, the numbers grew until I was leading consistently between 12 and 20 members per walk – but I did have to shrug off the early disappointments. Perhaps it just took time for me to get detected by the membership's radar.

If there is no leader or 'leadership group' in an area, members could get in touch via the message board to facilitate small groups of two or more arranging events. This could be useful even for a simple walk along an established railway path. Many rural rail trails benefit from great scenery at the expense of decent bus services. A small group of members can get around this by taking out a pair of cars and deploying one at each end of the trail. For that matter, we have now reached the stage where the 'railway cycle ride' is a distinct possibility – why not take bikes and ride both ways? There'll be no problems with buses then.

Reflecting the fact that I grew up during the Cold War, we could try some 'infiltration and subversion' as a way of getting something up and running in our quieter areas. The Ramblers' Association has a superb network of area groups covering the whole country, and many members of RR belong to the RA as well. Such members might like to organise a walk for the RA which includes at least some old railway content. Similarly, the nation has a large but little known resource in the hundreds of industrial archaeology societies that exist up and down the land. Members who belong to a local IA group could lead a railway walk for them. (By the way, the Sussex Industrial Archaeology Society organises several walks every year, and I supply the relevant parts of our local railway walks programme to them. Other area groups might wish to do the same – it's a good way of attracting new members.)

What underpins these suggestions is an awareness that any walk leader will be gratified by a good level of support. It can be very demoralising to plan something that takes weeks, or even months, to organise, only to have just three or four participants show up. Organising railway-themed events for other groups is one way of ensuring that a decent level of support is forthcoming, and there is no reason why Railway Ramblers should not do as The Branch Line Society does and publish a list of 'Others' Doings' in its magazine. On the same theme, I am sure I do not have to remind readers that they are welcome on any club walk in any area. If you are going on holiday in the UK, why not have a look at the local programme of walks to see if something interesting is coming up? Walk leaders like Phil Earnshaw and Chris Parker get all over the place, and stage some superb events which take months of planning and frequently include rare access to privately owned land. (Perhaps a future article could look at how to research and plan such walks?)

I hope that I have supplied plenty of ideas for members to think about. I realise that some of my suggestions are not about pure trackbed-bashing, but I would like to return briefly to the

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story of EURS. When I joined this society, it was struggling. It had an active membership of less than 20, and perhaps only 12. When I was elected Treasurer in 1973, I was horrified to discover that it was technically bankrupt. Fortunately, the committee was of one mind: we broadened the society's activities and appeal so that, within three years, we had more than quadrupled both its active and total membership. Only one member – a signalling specialist – complained, on the grounds that my colleagues and I had 'subverted' it. I was hurt by this remark and should have pointed out that the 'old' EURS had been bankrupt. Overspending was a cause but, in a university of over 4,000 students, the society had virtually no appeal. In 1986, Railway Ramblers visited this dark place too. Thus, I close with an appeal for diversity in what we offer.