

Railing against the machine: a campaigner's inside line



DERMOT KEYES



A beet train passing through Wellington Bridge in 2002. The end of beet production, as far as Iarnród Éireann was concerned given its subsequent actions (or lack thereof), signalled the deathknell for the Waterford-Rosslare line.

Doctor Mark Gleeson, who quickly professed his South Tipperary roots when meeting this columnist in Dublin recently, is a mind of rail-related information.

And through his work with Rail Users Ireland (of which he is both Treasurer and regular contact for the media), Mark is currently involved in the fight to save the Waterford-Rosslare railway line.

"It's a misunderstood route," said Mark, whose engineering background has proven most useful during his many and frequently frustrating deliberations with Iarnród Éireann (IE).

"For one thing, it's faster than either the car or the bus - anything from 20 to 40 minutes faster," he said.

"Now, you have to drive through New Ross, normally, if you want to get out of South Wexford - and the traffic delays on the bridge into and out of the town are, at this stage, all too well-known.

"If you want to go the other way via the Passage East ferry, of course that's an option, but in my view, it's quite expensive when compared to rail travel.

"And that's also a route you'll take in the hope that there's space on the ferry when you show up, and that the weather is good enough for that particular service to operate. That's a potential problem you rarely, if ever encounter when travelling by train."

The connection to Rosslare Europort (despite IE's shifting the platform away from the ferry terminal) also carries potential for greater business, despite the operator's contrary protestations, he continued.

"There's a clear demand at both ends of the line. You've got Waterford, which people from South Wexford are commuting to, and then there's Rosslare, which people want to access for trips and short breaks to Britain. And of course, you've got people that want to go to Dublin as well."

Mark added: "Take the Western Rail Corridor, for example. About half the people boarding in Ennis are going to Dublin; about 120,000 boarded it so far

this year and half of those journeys are actually to and from Dublin.

"So that clearly proves that if you provide a regular, properly timetabled service, that greater numbers of customers will avail of it, no question.

"But by leaving the service on the Waterford-Rosslare line as virtually an independent entity which doesn't connect to anything, it's difficult to see how it could perform well.

"By not building any flexibility into the service, say you want to stay in town for a pint, or if you want to stay on in work for an hour and you want to get to and from work by train in either direction, that possibility has been eliminated by Iarnród Éireann."

The machinations of IE have become a source of regular head scratching for Mark Gleeson and his RUI colleagues, who have weighed in behind the 'Save The Rail' campaign.

"What annoys me is that (IE) has never tried anything when it comes to boosting passenger numbers on the route. It's as if they really don't care or frankly just couldn't be bothered. They just want the line shut and to be done with it.

"Yet it's not as if they haven't tried to improve things on other routes: look at Dublin-Sligo, in the mid-90s; it was on the

list of closures. Now it's the second busiest line in the country with 1.1 million people a year using it, putting it number two behind the Dublin-Cork route."

But when it comes to South Wexford, serving as a potential interconnector to Limerick and Galway (via Waterford) and Dublin through two different routes, not a single marketing finger has been lifted.

"A lot of local people don't actually know there's a service on the line, and that's probably down to the times the train actually runs at, they're probably not at home where they might see it.

"And it's the same story all the way up to Clonmel. I had cousins there going to UL for four years who didn't even know that there was a passenger train servicing Limerick running through their town. Why (IE) has got such a blind spot to South Wexford and South Tipperary remains a mystery to me."

RUI's alliance with 'Save The Rail' in recent months has highlighted local concerns on a national level.

Both Mark Gleeson and STR Chairperson Tanya Fenelon have together met with private operators who've expressed an interest in taking over the line.

And while legislation would be required to sell or lease the line to a private company, the interest being expressed by reputable foreign operators provides a source of hope looking to the future.

"The snow last winter and the volcanic ash cloud proved that people in South Wexford will use the line - the service was packed during both those odd spells of weather," Mark added.

"The fact that more than one private company has expressed an interest in a route that Irish Rail isn't interested in running suggests to me that there is actually business there."

IE could scarcely have envisaged that their proposed closure of the line would catalyse such a strong reaction from South Wexford residents, while also uniting the region's Councillors and Chambers of Commerce.