

ARGYLL PUBLISHING

Glendaruel
Argyll PA22 3AE
Scotland
tel 01369 820229
fax 01369 820372
email argyll.publishing@virgin.net
www.argyllpublishing.co.uk
Publisher: Derek Rodger
VAT Registration no 6170089 55

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NEW BOOK REVELATIONS – MISSING MINISTERS MIGHT HAVE BLOCKED BORDERS RAIL CLOSURE

The 1969 closure of the 98-mile Waverley Route from Edinburgh to Carlisle via Galashiels and Hawick [1] – long regarded as the worst of the Beeching rail cuts [2] – may have been clinched by the absence of two key Government ministers from a crucial Westminster meeting. Research by author David Spaven [3] for his new book **Waverley Route: the life, death and rebirth of the Borders Railway** [4] has unearthed previously unpublished evidence. Out this month, the book claims that Anthony Crosland MP and Lord Brown of Machrihanish – known supporters of retention of the railway from Hawick to Edinburgh – failed to attend the 21st May 1968 meeting of the Ministerial Committee on Environmental Planning [5], where a majority verdict sealed the fate of the entire railway. This highly controversial decision left the Scottish Borders as the only region of Britain without a rail service, and as the author writes in his verdict on why the railway closed:

“The course of Borders’ history may have been altered by the most mundane of chance occurrences.”

Spaven’s book – based on extensive research of public and private archive material over the last two and a half years – also reveals that Transport Minister, Richard Marsh, who implemented the closure decision, privately admitted 38 years later to a retired senior railway manager [6] that looking back on his public life the biggest mistake he had made was to authorise closure of the Waverley Route, arguing nevertheless that “It was not really my fault – I was badly briefed [by civil servants]. I should have looked more closely at what I had been told to say.”

Research reveals that Labour’s fiery Secretary of State for Scotland, Willie Ross MP, was privately worried that Borders MP David Steel would precipitate a by-election on the rail closure issue. Interviewed for the book by the author in 2011, Steel commented: “I wish I had known Willie Ross’s thoughts at the time!” Government papers show that Ross – who was criticised by Steel for not doing enough to stop the closure of the line – had in fact argued strongly until the very end for retention of the line north of Hawick, and in a personal memo to Prime Minister Harold Wilson [7] went as far as to say, “I would beg you to look at the cumulative consequences of our course of action on our standing in Scotland.” Wilson turned down his plea for the Government decision to be reversed.

On a night of high drama on 5th/6th January 1969, a community protest at Newcastleton station blocked the passage of the very last train from Edinburgh to Carlisle via the Central Borders. Spaven’s book includes eye witness accounts of these events and extracts from the official British Rail and Lothian & Borders Police dossiers [8].

Waverley Route: the life, death and rebirth of the Borders Railway traces the story from the 1963 publication of the Beeching Report through closure to the later campaigns to re-open the line [9], culminating in the planned opening of the new Borders Railway from Edinburgh to Tweedbank in 2014-15 [10]. The author criticises the failure of government to protect the solum (trackbed) of the abandoned railway from the early 1970s to the mid 1990s – allowing encroachment by new roads and housing developments – and cites evidence that this has added up to 40% to the cost of re-opening the line.

Spaven says that the Borders Railway will be a record-breaker – the longest line to open in Scotland since the Fort William-Mallaig railway in 1901, and the longest rail re-opening project in modern British history. However, while strongly welcoming the return of the railway which "will be an astonishing achievement for a prospect which was dismissed by all but a handful of rail visionaries just 20 years ago", he urges campaigners to keep pressing for improvements in the design of the new railway:

"The Borders Railway will transform the quality of public transport between Galashiels and Edinburgh, but rail campaigners are right to be worried by rumours that Transport Scotland [11] is seeking capital cost savings by reducing the proportion of double track on the route – leading to Tweedbank-Edinburgh journey times being extended from 55 minutes to an hour or more. And the current plans for the Tweedbank terminus mean it will not have enough track capacity to accommodate tourist charter trains bringing hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of additional visitor spend every year into the Borders economy."

ENDS

MORE INFO – David Spaven on 0131-447-7764 or 07917-877399

– Derek Rodger (Argyll Publishing) on 01369 820229

NOTES FOR EDITORS:

[1] The double-track Waverley Route from Edinburgh to Carlisle via Midlothian, Galashiels, Melrose, St Boswells, Hawick, Newcastleton and Longtown was closed on 6th January 1969.

[2] The 'Beeching cuts' refer to the extensive programme of rail closures implemented by the UK Government following the 1963 publication of **The Reshaping of British Railways** report by Dr Richard Beeching, Chairman of the British Railways Board. Only one line longer than the Waverley Route was closed – the Great Central Railway in England – and the closure of the railway through the Borders left Hawick and Galashiels further from the rail network than any other towns of their size across Britain.

[3] David Spaven is a rail freight consultant by profession and has spent his working life in and around the railway industry. His first book – the highly-acclaimed **Mapping the Railways** – was published by HarperCollins in 2011, and his follow-up volume **Britain's Scenic Railways** is published by HarperCollins in September 2012.

[4] **Waverley Route: the life, death and rebirth of the Borders Railway** (collector's edition hardback 288pages £20; paperback 256 pages £14.99) is published by Argyll Publishing on 29th August 2012. Review copies are available from Derek Rodger on 01369 820229 or derek.rodger@btconnect.com .

[5] The Ministerial Committee on Environmental Planning – which was in fact more concerned with economic impacts – took decisions on only the most controversial of rail closures.

[6] The admission by Marsh (who died in 2011) was made in June 2006 at a private dinner – to Mike Chorley, who had retired as British Rail’s Area Civil Engineer at Perth in 1993 after a 37-year railway career.

[7] Willie Ross’s 23rd May 1968 memo to Harold Wilson stated, *inter alia*, that:

“You will have seen from this morning’s press – and may already have been told by Dick Marsh that David Steele [sic], whose constituency would be most vitally affected by the proposal to close the line, has said that he would have no alternative but to resign his seat so that the issue involved could be put to the electorate. I do not think that this is in any way an idle threat and, while you may feel that Steele’s decision should not cause us to lose any sleep, I think it must be seen as a measure of the serious feeling which is likely to be created. If we are to face a by-election on the credibility of our intentions in regard to the Borders at this juncture I would have no illusions about the outcome. . . I am prepared to argue my case on the outstanding issues on their own merits; but this apart, I would beg you to look at the cumulative consequences of our course of action on our standing in Scotland. I very much hope that you will be prepared to consider with the Ministers what can be done.”

[8] The paperback edition (£14.99) of **Waverley Route: the life, death and rebirth of the Borders Railway** incorporates extracts from both the BR and Lothian & Borders Police dossiers. The Collector’s Hardback Edition (£20) includes the entire transcript of the BR dossier – plus an additional chapter on ‘The First Century’ of the railway, as well as other internal BR reports and two poems about the Waverley Route written by serving railwaymen.

[9] The first moves to press for re-opening of the railway began in 1993; the Campaign for Borders Rail was launched in 1999; and the Waverley Railway (Scotland) Act was passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2006.

[10] The Borders Railway (as it is now called) will involve the construction of 31 miles of new railway from Newcraighall in south east Edinburgh to Tweedbank in the Scottish Borders, with new stations at Shawfair, Eskbank, Newtongrange, Gorebridge, Stow, Galashiels and Tweedbank.

[11] Transport Scotland, the Scottish Government’s transport agency, is delivering the new railway in conjunction with local authorities and the rail industry. Transport Scotland is currently in negotiation with Network Rail to transfer to the latter the ‘statutory undertake’ role to build and maintain the new railway. An announcement on the conclusion of this contract is anticipated in late summer, and it is hoped that line construction will begin before the end of 2012.

END OF RELEASE