

Rail replacement, M&GN style

Another short story from Alan M Watkins

The first ever rail replacement was for the much lamented M&GN (Midland & Great Northern Joint - I'm a member of the flourishing Society) was, inevitably, almost as eccentric as the Muddle and Go Nowhere route that it replaced. This was the Eastern Counties 401 from, wait for it, Great Yarmouth to Kings Lynn – over four hours on seating considerably less comfortable than the poor old muddle provided. And if anyone wanted to go from Lynn to Peterborough you had another two hours on Service 336 which wandered all over the place! Of course the M&GN did meander and trundle along and loss make with virtually every journey but, maintaining this fine tradition, so did the ECOC route that replaced it. None of this "limited stop" nonsense - it stopped anywhere and everywhere. I never did the whole journey but I did once travel from Fakenham to Yarmouth and, much as we all love buses and would dearly like to do it today on buses of the period, I have to say that I think a love of buses was a pre requisite for this trip and I can't believe your average ordinary punter derived that much joy from it.

I call it the revenge of the M&GN because it was probably the most logistically disastrous route that ECOC ever had to operate and, just for fun, split of course between the Eastern and Western Area. They had to do as they were told when the decision was taken to close the line but it's not a route that any sane person would have invented as a commercial possibility - the exact problem of course with the train service. I used to be good friends with the Assistant Traffic Manager at Norwich who once claimed that this route had been invented "to ruin my last 18 months."

They had to find extra outstation staff - always a nightmare - just to get this thing off the ground. It took them a while to do that and for some time they had to ferry drivers and conductors from other areas (all on overtime probably which is why I call it the revenge of the M&GN) to and fro various locations by TAXI. They had the spare vehicles but no one in some areas to crew them!

It's aged memory but I think I'm right in saying that the scheduling was done basically by the Western Area and, in a further delicious irony, replicated exactly what happened when one Operating Superintendent in a railway division was scheduling into another railway division. Yes, that's right he did what was right for HIS division! LOL.

And according to my late friend the ATM this resulted in Kings Lynn not providing a single vehicle for this gargantuan service! Smart scheduling, smart scheduling! Boy done good as the young people say today.

So this monolithic route fell to Yarmouth and any number of hapless outstations miles away from either Yarmouth or Kings Lynn which, I would argue, in the True Spirit of the M&GN fell more or less exactly in the middle where those involved had the least resources to deal with it and were promptly left to get on with by quite separate Head Offices. Which was more or less what happened on the M&GN when it was a railway!

And so in a fairly hapless attempt to follow the train pattern with "substitute services" at roughly the same departure times what happened in this "middle muddle"? The bulk of this service fell to muddle and going nowhere ECOC outstations such as Melton Constable (three vehicles, serves them right it was a railway junction and probably the most important point on the M&GN, certainly if you are thinking of taking revenge), Aylsham, Fakenham, North Walsham also got involved in this adventure. A sociologist, not so prominent then, might argue that the involvement of Stalham and Great Massingham outstation bordered on the perverse.

Last home on a Saturday night were twenty to one in the morning at Yarmouth and six minutes after midnight at North Walsham. I expect like the M&GN they were probably packed out . . .

In an attempt to get this thread back vaguely in the direction of Eastern Counties buses I will leave you with the comments of the late ATM at Norwich who told it thus.

"We knew closure of the M&GN was likely but because we were part of government we couldn't do anything at all in advance. We actually had two days notice before the decision was made public so we knew it was going to close. I think it was midweek - there was always a gap because they had to print the notices for every train station and list the appeal process.

In the week it was announced our Chief Scheduling Clerk retired after 35 years at Norwich and we had not appointed a successor because these vacancies were advertised across the group internally - they had to be - and we had received six or seven applications but had not yet done interviews.

I remember it very well because the Traffic Manager said: "I'm on leave for a fortnight from Monday as you know and, as it's obviously going to need a lot of talk between us and Western, and without a CSC you are going to have to take charge of this one. I've got more OMO talks coming up so I'd be very grateful if you'd look after the detail on this one. Thanks."