

What do you think we are?

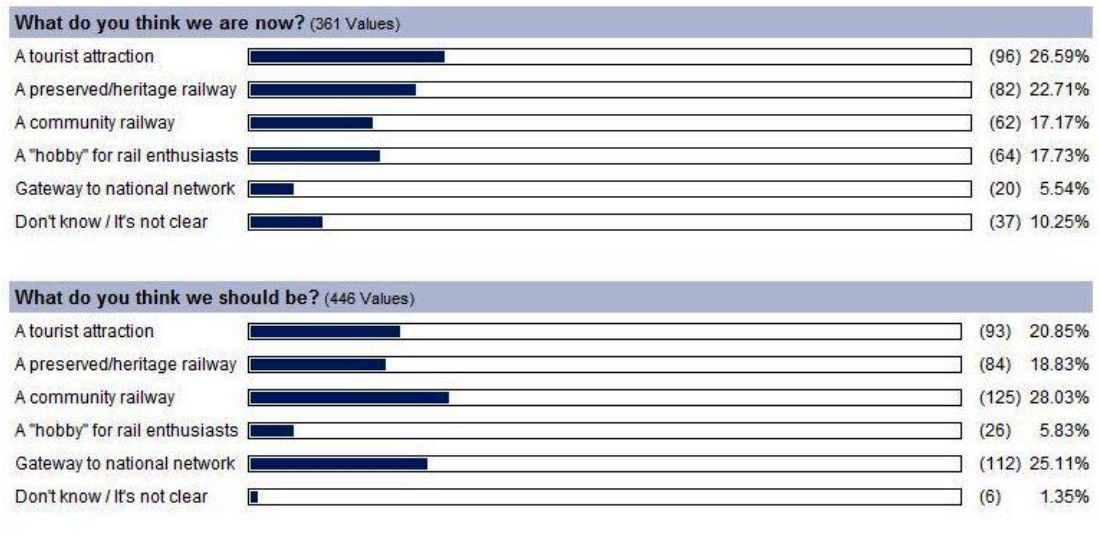
Sandra Ward reviews the results of a recent WRA website survey

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Sitting here pondering the results of the latest WRA website survey which closed on 31 August 2009, I am metaphorically scratching my head – as Stan Laurel was wont to do, when in a fix. While I would not go so far as describing the outcome as analogous with Oliver Hardy's trademark "that's another fine mess..." the Wensleydale Railway comes across as many different things to many people.

Not necessarily a bad thing, but how does the Railway compare now with what it was foreseen to be at the outset of its revival and which track will it follow in the future?

The WR reinstatement project was, of course, conceived back in 1990 with the provision of a community public transport service at its heart. The first part of the website survey invited responses to the proposition "**What do you think we are now?**" offering six options for reply. The second part posed the question "**What do you think we should be?**" based upon the same six choices. Respondents could give more than one answer to each question. The results (collated from some 200 individual entries) are shown in the table.



It is not wholly surprising that the Railway is perceived as a tourist attraction/heritage/preserved line (combined 49.3% of "now" votes) in the view of the majority of respondents, with community railway status lagging some way behind (17.7%) and even eclipsed by the Railway's image as a "hobby for rail enthusiasts" (17.73%). Worryingly, over 10% do not have a clear picture of what we are now.

It is equally apparent, however, that people remain faithful to the concept of a community railway as this is the preferred option in the "should be" category (28.03%), followed closely by the desire to see the branch become more of a gateway to the national network (25.11%) and less of a hobby (5.83%). These are encouraging signs for the future.

Some survey entries included comments and these are reproduced below.

Having sadly allowed my membership to expire 3 years ago it seems the leadership is still concerned with spending money on pointless studies and is guided by people who are driven by ego and image. Railways like North Yorks are the example to follow. Wensleydale could be the national success story with the best route, the best business potential (coast to coast) and by far the highest profit. So less "business speak" and much more action. Talking around Leyburn local people see the association as a group of train spotters totally detached from local needs.

A link to and modelled on the Settle-Carlisle line would be the best outcome for all. This would provide useful public transport, preserve railway heritage and be a valuable tourist draw. Good luck!

Saw you on BBC's "The One Show". This should be a model for the reopening of branch lines all over the country with a mixture of voluntary and professional staff. Railways are a public service and you are doing excellent work.

If only other Yorkshire lines viz Harrogate - Ripon and Harrogate -Wetherby- Cross Gates had remained at least partly intact, we might have the means to alleviate the heavy commuter traffic which chokes our country roads.

You need to get to Aysgarth Falls asap and on to Hawes; that should be the main goal as Redmire, well, isn't anywhere attractive is it? Lobby for EU grants for this as a community railway/transport link etc. Now is the time to get this link to Northallerton - nice in theory but at what cost? There isn't a bay platform anymore... how about a bus link specific to the railway?

Good luck with your goals - hope you can run ordinary national services one day, perhaps as part of a bigger franchise if necessary.

Very friendly railway, like the diesel railcars.

Please stick with the original vision of a useful public transport service.

We need to be a community railway to get the dales people behind us. Tourists don't always come back; villages could use it every day bringing in more revenue.

We used the railway at Easter to Bolton Castle, a fantastic route. To me the priority must be to get to Aysgarth before Northallerton. Aysgarth is always packed with people.

At the moment it is a question of survival and repairing decades of neglect and trying to improve the infrastructure so that the railway can develop further.

Think you've got a cracking think going with the railway. You really must get the junction into Northallerton asap (I'm sure you're trying) and get it publicised as much as possible. Get on Look North Countrywide or any other such TV programme. Keep the latest news updated as often as possible on the expansion plans etc. Keep up the good work :)

If the Wensleydale Railway is restricted from accessing Northallerton station by reversing over it without the south curve why not utilise the existing North Curve and travel to Darlington and build a temporary station at Castle Hills (off the ECML) until the South Curve is constructed?

Mainline passenger exchange at Northallerton vital to fulfil roles as a community railway and a gateway to the National Park.

Most railway lines throughout UK have had increase in usage the past few years. The "Dales" should be better overall connected with National services. If proper connection would be made ridership would rise and your railway would be of general greater benefit to the communities served.

The East link to Northallerton is good but the West link is vital and includes many sites of interest including a tunnel and viaduct. Most of the trackbed is still intact and as far as I can see none is built upon as yet. As I see it the project is still feasible but 'out of the box' thinking is needed.

A railway such as this provides a wonderful opportunity for rail enthusiasts to indulge their interests but also has a longer term future as demonstrating the usefulness of public transport in a rural setting particularly if current car use becomes more difficult. At some point the jump will need to be made from running trains for tourists (a good thing in itself) to running a timetabled service for the local people. This may become feasible when the link to the rail network at Northallerton is achieved.

Many coach operators operate mystery tours and tours of the Dales. I see very few coaches in the Leeming Bar car park. Have you tried emailing these companies with a view of selling the train ride incorporating the coach tour?

Direct Connection to Northallerton will make a lot of difference to usefulness as a Community Railway.

Just seen you on the tele and have spent rather too long browsing your website. Love the photos! I used to live in the NE and still get back up there occasionally; will certainly pay you a visit next time.

Great work everyone, seen all the work on your website.

Small steps big vision... Tourist at the start but dales folk to York asap then onwards to Aysgarth, Hawes and the Settle/Carlisle.

Once you get to Hawes you will hit the tourist gold pot. I would like to see a connection with the Settle line. To succeed you must look at every funding that is at your disposal, the main one being the heritage fund, also derelict land fund.

The Northallerton link would allow us to serve the community by being a link to the national network. Extending to Aysgarth would increase our potential for use by tourists.

All can be achievable but you need to get money in eg: tourists. Loco hauled stock would help improve this railway as well as running more trains - every 2 hours is a disgrace!

I understand that when the railway was set up it was as a community railway but always doubted it would succeed as

A) There is not the population along the dale to be economically viable - who would commute on a railway that runs only part of the year on certain days of the week on a train that goes no faster than 15/25mph?

B) The infrastructure to reach the biggest local community (Northallerton) would cost an exorbitant amount. I believe that recent signs (working heritage diesels/August steam trains and Thomas events) indicate a shift to the tourist/leisure market. At 18

miles it is a long heritage railway and probably needs a destination that tourists can visit (Bolton Castle/Aysgarth Falls/Hawes etc) but needs to spend some money looking at making the line more attractive through its stations/maintenance facilities/museum etc. As a local person with an interest to get involved with a railway the Wensleydale provides "less interest" as its reliance on DMUs is not the most exciting. I will however continue to visit as personally taking the bike to the end of the line and exploring the hills by bike is still a joy. Hope you get some balanced feedback and listen to your consumers' views.

The line is currently not really any of the above due to the limited and often unreliable service. No-one seems to be able to convey accurate information meaning it is difficult to make any progress.