

# FONR Newsletter

from The Friends of the Northern Railway

November 2005

## You Can Still Buy a Ticket at Armidale Railway Station

Those who care about the Xplorer passenger train service were pleasantly surprised to learn that the Armidale Countrylink Travel Centre would be kept fully operational. Other booking offices were not treated so well in the mid-October review of the reservations system.

Disturbing rumours had circulated that staff at Armidale Railway Station would be cut back from two to one, that opening hours would be reduced and even that the travel centre would be closed completely. So when it was all decided, the MP for Northern Tablelands, Richard Torbay, would have taken particular pleasure in noting that



the Armidale Travel Centre would keep both of its staff and, most importantly, that it would continue to open prior to the departure of the train for six mornings each week.

Sadly other country booking offices received bad news, notably the Tamworth Countrylink Travel Centre. As any passenger knows Tamworth is a busy station when the train pulls in, but

office staffing is being reduced. Many Countrylink travel centres in the Sydney metropolitan area and some regional ones are closing completely.

To compensate, more CityRail booking offices are handling

Countrylink tickets, arrangements with travel agents are being improved and you can now buy your ticket on the internet.

## New Fare Discounts

Countrylink have ushered in a new system of fare discounts to replace the old unsatisfactory advance purchase tickets.

Since early November they have been offering rationed discounted seats on all Countrylink services, depending on the season of travel. This resembles the "best available fare" approach adopted by most airlines. During Peak season there is no discount. In Shoulder season seats with a 20 percent discount are available; and in the Low season there are 40 percent discounts.

The three fare seasons are scattered in a complicated pattern through the year, due to various school and university holidays and other peak travel weekends and events. You should enquire at your Countrylink Travel Centre or by phoning 132232 to find the best available fare when you want to travel.

The old system of advance purchase fares had long been criticized by the Friends of the Northern Railway for failing to collect proper revenues on Countrylink services at times of the year when seats were heavily sold out.

Generous discounts were given, regardless of the season of travel, to anyone who booked at least seven days in advance. If the booking was made 14 days prior to travel then the tickets were even cheaper, although Countrylink were often aware that demand would exceed capacity several times over, on a long weekend or at Christmas.

When our trains were threatened with the axe, Countrylink complained that revenue was too low, but then admitted that their computer system was unable to ration discounted tickets according to demand. The new system should help to secure our passenger train service in the future.

## Passengers in the Mall

A person is a potential passenger and there were plenty of them in the Armidale Mall on two Saturday mornings in October.

Ken Dickins, an FONR committee member, organised an information table on the 15th and 29th October, to raise public awareness of the Xplorer passenger train service, to promote its use between Armidale and Tamworth and to show the flag for the Friends of the Northern Railway.



*Don Martin and Ken Dickins in Beardy Street Mall on Saturday, 29th October.*

The committee had been concerned to take some action to remedy the slightly disappointing passenger numbers on the train north of Tamworth as we had observed them during the first half of this year.

Countrylink helped by supplying some brochures and free souvenir rulers and pencils for us to distribute; and we added our own flyer giving details of day trips to Tamworth from Armidale or Uralla.

During the two Saturdays more than 400 of our "Going to Tamworth? Why not Take the Train?" flyers were well received by the passing public. We only recruited one new member, but there was a lot of goodwill; and whether it is due to seasonal variation or the efforts of the FONR, passenger numbers on the Armidale-Tamworth leg of the Xplorer train have been boosted in November.

It would be good to undertake some more public activities next year. Wait for an announcement.

# President's Message

I was honoured to be returned as president on the FONR committee at our deferred annual general meeting in May this year. Perhaps I have been given an easy time, because the passenger train service to Armidale and Moree has not seemed so secure for many years and there is other positive railway news for our region. Even so, we need to remain vigilant.

We can all be thankful for Don Martin's hard work as president over the past eleven years. He diligently kept the group going through the nineties, raised its profile as a learned and thinking lobby group and then in 2003 led us into the great struggle to keep the train running in the face of the severe "Beeching-like" Parry Report. During those years the FONR committee prepared some important submissions to various parliamentary committees and government inquiries. Perhaps Don's most important work was the FONR response to the Parry Inquiry itself, a comprehensive document that formed the basis of our arguments with the Minister for Transport, Michael Costa, in September, 2003, and was relied upon by others in local government and state parliament to defend our regional passenger train services.

I am very glad that Don, together with other dedicated servants of the FONR, has stayed on the committee this year and is helping Paul Ashley and Greg Smith to prepare a new submission on the options for the proposed rail freight

corridor to Queensland. Thanks also to David Heap, our Secretary, who has kept our administration in order since the FONR began.

Freight is, of course, the profitable business that keeps railway lines open in the twenty-first century. It was disappointing when the great enterprise to load containerized logs for transport by rail from Armidale to Newcastle and thence export to China became dormant after only two trains had run in 2004 and was finally pronounced discontinued this year.

The good freight news in 2005 was the surprising revelation that the main northern line through Armidale via Glen Innes and Tenterfield was being seriously considered as one of the options for a new eastern rail freight corridor to Brisbane and elsewhere. It had always been assumed that the only officially recognized route to supplement the hard pressed North Coast line was the Moree to Goondiwindi proposal. The outcome of the Federal Government inquiry into this big infrastructure choice will be one of Australia's very important decisions.

The Xplorer train may have been scratching to get more than a bus full of passengers on the Armidale to Tamworth section on many mornings earlier this year, but I was greatly heartened to find myself one of 104 passengers as the train departed Armidale on Tuesday, 22nd November. Coming home again three days later we made our way north from Tamworth with 91 people on board. Perhaps this will become the norm!

Thanks for your support,  
**Matthew Tierney**

## Werris Creek Museum

The upgraded Rail Journeys Museum has opened at Werris Creek Railway Station, concurrently with the much-publicized national railway monument.

The displays are of a very high standard and you need some time to take it in, but you can have a quick look if you are passing through on the train, or buy a souvenir from the shop at the entrance.



## Northern Rivers and Newcastle

### Can they stay on the rails?

On the Northern Tablelands and on the line to Moree we continue to enjoy all the benefits of our passenger train service, but Lismore, the Northern Rivers and Newcastle are not so happy.

Like Armidale, the Murwillumbah line had no freight running on it. It was further burdened by numerous major timber bridges in need of maintenance and repair. Nevertheless, the decision taken in a state "mini-budget" in April 2004 to axe the Murwillumbah XPT was a betrayal of the people of the Northern Rivers because it happened only part way through a twelve month moratorium promised by the minister, during which the performance of Countrylink trains was to be further monitored.

The citizens of the university town of Lismore and the communities to the north are organizing to get their trains back. You can visit their group, Northern Rivers Trains for the Future, on the internet at: [www.toot.org.au](http://www.toot.org.au)

Further south, in the lower Hunter Valley, there are continuing differences of opinion over the state government's intention to scrap the railway line to Newcastle and to make everyone get on to a bus at Broadmeadow. On a different scale, this would be something like closing Central and the City Circle line and putting everyone on buses at Ashfield or Redfern, so that the railway property could be re-developed.

Increasingly the Newcastle rail closure is being seen as of benefit only to certain commercial interests and as a disaster for the travelling public. Twenty years ago, Perth and Fremantle were wise enough to turn back just in time from converting their trains to buses. Let's hope Newcastle can be kept on the rails too. We're told that Newcastle University students like to catch late evening trains between Warrabrook and the city.

Save Our Rail NSW Inc are campaigning for the Newcastle railway. Their secretary, George Paris, can be emailed on: [georgeparis@ozemail.com.au](mailto:georgeparis@ozemail.com.au)

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