

'We're starting a bus company'

– the birth of Western Dales Bus



Dentdale in the high Pennines of Cumbria, about as rural as you can get.

When the Midland Railway built the Settle to Carlisle Railway in the 1870s through the high Pennines of what is today Cumbria and North Yorkshire, they often paid scant regard to serving the local inhabitants. Many of the stations on the line are encouragingly named after settlements but are in fact many miles from them. None more so than Dent at the

at least two hours. These days transport to and from the station is even more important because this is a very popular area for tourists and they, whilst enjoying the natural splendours of walking and climbing in the area, also want to access services where the locals are keen to help encourage them to spend their money. Tourism income is vital in this area.

the Council area that it could possibly fund the bus long term.

The solution came, as things often do, from a casual conversation in one of Dent's pubs across a few pints of the famous locally brewed Ramsbottom Ale. The group came up with the idea of running a community bus operation. Things moved pretty rapidly after that and after



The Western Dales' Bus hauls itself up the last few yards of the steep road to Dent Station.

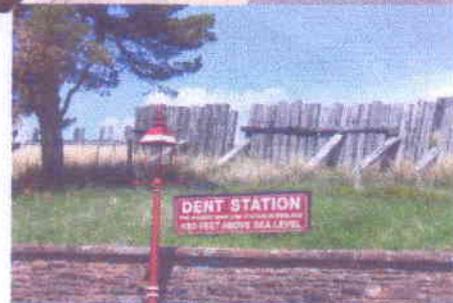
head of Dentdale in Cumbria and within the Yorkshire Dales National Park. The station, the highest in England at 1150ft, lies four miles and some 750 ft higher than its namesake village.

Accessing the station has always been important for the inhabitants of the area as it provides the best connection to the outside world. The alternative is a long drive over very narrow winding roads. From Dent station they can be in Carlisle or Leeds within the hour, by road either is

When Cumbria County Council cut its subsidy for the local Saturday bus service that connected the station to Dent, Cowgill and Sedbergh, giving onward connections to Kendal, the service was no longer viable for a commercial operator. Anxious not to lose the service the local Parish Council stepped in and provided funding to keep it operating but this was a short term measure until a more sustainable alternative could be achieved. There was no way with the small population of



Dent Station, the highest in England and four miles and 750 ft above the village of Dent!



discussions with the 10 local parish councils in the Kirkby Lonsdale and Sedbergh area, Cumbria County Council and DITA (Dales Integrated Transport Alliance) the group was able to establish

long term funding to develop the plan. Initially they began by contracting the previous commercial operator, Kirkby Lonsdale Coaches, to operate the service for them but the longer term goal was to run the service themselves. They set up a company by limited guarantee – Western Dales

provides seating for 14 or can carry up to six wheelchairs. It is disabled accessible using a rear mounted underfloor PLS lift. Disabled passengers have to pre-book as seats have to be removed from the vehicle to create space for wheelchairs. The bus is leased from Cumbria County Council

which also covers maintenance, road tax, insurance, fuel card and the Wayfarer ticket machine which is linked into CCC's system for the repayment of concessionary fares. The Group are also able to claim BSOG.

The service, which connects with most trains on the Settle-Carlisle line, operates on Saturdays throughout the year and Sundays from May through to October. At the moment the Western Dales Bus operates the Saturday service using its bus. They

operate five services on Saturday to Dent and four to Sedbergh, all connect with train arrivals at Dent Station. The Sunday and Bank Holiday service provides a link from Sedbergh through Dent to Hawes in North Yorkshire another very popular tourist destination and then returns through Dent. This year that service is provided by Kirkby Lonsdale Coaches under contract from Western Dales Bus Co, as the new group were not sure they would have enough volunteers to cover both Saturdays and Sundays. That situation may well change in the future.

The company also has plans for other services within the area bounded by the ten member parishes. 'We see our role very much as filling in the gaps that commercial operators cannot fill because of financial viability,' Jock Cairns told me. 'There are many areas within the ten parishes that either have no bus connections or very limited ones. Even if we can only provide one service a week for these people to access the larger towns and services that is better than not having any link.'

The Group are very clear about how they interface with the commercial operators, 'It is not our wish or intention to take away any work from commercial operators our job is to do the bits they cannot do. We already work closely with commercial operators and it is our intention to continue doing so, but there are many instances

where the only possibility of providing a service is by using volunteers,' said Jock.

The Group's immediate plans are to reach long term financial stability and they are well down the road to achieving that. This is likely to always be a mix of passenger receipts and grant funding. They are also working towards owning their own bus, ideally a 16-seat accessible Mercedes-Benz Sprinter and longer term they aspire to a directly wheelchair accessible vehicle.

If the services develop as they are already doing they can also see the situation where they could need a second vehicle.

Although Western Dales Bus launched their takeover of the 564A service on 8 June they have in fact been running it since 18 May. Early indications are that it is proving very popular and at times there can be capacity problems. They aren't that easy to solve. The Group are restricted in the size of vehicle they can use (maximum 16 seats) both because they are a voluntary operation operating under a Section 22 permit and also because the route to Dent Station, especially the last half mile, involves a very narrow, winding, steep road which larger vehicles would struggle to handle. The availability of a second vehicle would help ease this problem.

Currently there are 30 volunteers operating for the Group. Of these 16 are drivers who have received full MIDAS training and there are a further four currently undergoing training. The aim which the Group feel is achievable is to have a pool of 50 volunteers ideally with at least 30 of them able to drive services.

I hope that Western Dales Bus succeeds. To me it demonstrates exactly how commercial operations and voluntary run operations can sit alongside and work with each other to provide the best service possible to people in rural areas.

I know the model works. I've been involved with the very similar Fellrunner Village Bus operation in the North of Cumbria. We've been doing it for over



The bus is a Peugeot Boxer 14-seater accessible minibus built by Minibus Options and leased from Cumbria County Council.

Bus Community Bus Service Ltd – normally known as Western Dales Bus – and applied for charitable status. They used a similar model to the Fellrunner Village Bus Company which has successfully run scheduled services using a section 22 permit without County subsidy for over 30 years. The key to their success has always been that the operation is entirely run by volunteers, so is Western Dales Bus.

This year has marked a significant step forward with the company being formally launched and running its first bus. The launch took place on Saturday 8 June appropriately at Dent Station for once bathed in glorious sunshine and not the more usual rain, wind and cold. I've been at Dent Station on more than one occasion when it has been difficult to stand up in the wind. The launch was carried out by local MP and President of the Liberal Democratic Party, Tim Farron, who paid tribute to the tenacity of the group in getting the project off the ground and to the support the group has received from CCC, the Parish Councils and DITA.

The company is run by a Board of volunteers chaired by Jock Cairns, one of the original pub discussion group. A key member of the Board is Philip Ayres. Philip is well known in community transport circles for his work in developing community transport in Sussex especially the Cuckmere Buses operation of which he is also a Director and it was his guidance that played a crucial role in advising the Group how to become established and do things the right way. Other members of the board are Liz Nuttall, Volunteer Co-Ordinator; Mike Steele, Marketing & Publicity; Gordon Nuttall, Company Secretary; Peter Maples, Treasurer; John Carey (who works with the Dales and Bowland CIC) and Gordon Chivers, Fundraising. Alongside the Board there is also a Stakeholder Advisory Board with representatives from CCC, DITA and the local Parish Councils.

The Company's first vehicle is a Peugeot Boxer conversion by Minibus Options. The vehicle



Local MP, Tim Farron (left) and Western Dales Bus Chairman, Jock Cairns, officially launch the new bus company.

30 years and never had conflict with our commercial colleagues. As long as the lines are clearly laid down, each side knows exactly where they stand and what they can and cannot do, it will work and everyone will benefit.

By Rob Orchard