

A CAMPAIGN to get Radstock back on the rails has been relaunched by railway enthusiasts who say the line to Frome should be reopened.

The idea, which could mean passenger and/or heritage line trains running between the two towns again, is highly controversial.

Some residents say it is a pipe dream that would cost millions of pounds to turn into reality; the promoters, North Somerset Railway Heritage Trust, say it would have huge benefits for tourism and the local economy and would ease traffic congestion.

Here, Wendy Walker dips into the records to look at the arguments which have continued for the past two decades.

MOST people blame Dr Beeching for closing Radstock's two railway stations.

He believed railways should be run like a business, not a public service, and recommended closure of more than 2,000 stations in the 1960s. Midsomer Norton's was also among them.

The story of what happened after Radstock North closed in 1964 and Radstock West in 1965 is about the role of railways as a potential tourist attraction and money-spinning heritage lines, as passenger and freight services, getting cars and lorries off the roads.

It is also about clashes between rail conservation, councils and a town's regeneration plans.

In June 1988, the last train left Radstock. It had been using a siding for repairs at the town's wagonworks. Soon afterwards, rail enthusiasts launched the Somerset and Avon Railway Company (SARC) to restore the line to Frome.

Chairman Dennis Haines, from Frome, said they would raise 50,000 to buy land and track at Radstock and start building a new station.

The district council was planning a multi-million pound redevelopment of what was, by then, derelict railway land in central Radstock.

A supporters' trust, Somerset and Avon Railway Association (SARA), was formed.

SARC officer Rob May said there was potential for a halt in Kilmersdon, an operating base at Mells Road and a line from Whatley to the Frome Market Yard development.

"We are not doing it to make money," he declared.

"The idea is to look after the heritage of Radstock and Frome by giving life to the local railway."

But housing plans for the land were moving faster than the trains. British Rail and the wagonwork owners wanted to sell up and developers wanted to move in.

The railway enthusiasts pushed on. SARA gained a 1,500 grant to clean up a Victorian engine shed which it wanted to use as a museum.

Bath estate agent David Edwards came on the scene and a new share-issuing company was formed.

The dream of steam still seemed very much alive in 1996, when SARC held an open weekend.

Old carriages were being restored in the engine shed and an old quarry diesel was doing short runs.

But the company still did not have the legal entitlement to use bridges and buy track. It needed 10,000 to get that authority.

In 1997, Sustrans, the national cycling network, was given 42 million from the National Lottery and bought land along the Radstock line.

George Bailey, now director of the North Somerset Railway Company, SARC's successor, saw this as a death knell.

"Why not put the money towards reopening or maintaining the railway paths so the railways could use them again?" he asked.

By 1998, David Edwards was managing director of the company. He said a heritage railway could bring tourism and regeneration to Radstock, while passenger trains could reopen routes to Chippenham.

WS Atkins, a consultancy commissioned by local councils to investigate the project, said passenger demand would be too low to make the scheme viable and scope for rail freight was limited.

However, it said a heritage railway could open for 1.25 million and would be a nice feature for Radstock.

Meanwhile, Radstock's regeneration was forging ahead, helped by 2.9 million of Government money.

The railway could have a place, thought district council officers, recommending a new station building.

But Mr Edwards and the railway company protested. The building would be in the wrong place, right by a housing estate, they said.

By 2002 Norton Radstock Regeneration Company (NRR) had been formed to buy the land for development and commercial railway plans were not in its blueprint.

The 1,800 shareholders of North Somerset Railway Company took a vote of no confidence in Mr Edwards and he resigned.

A year later, NRR decided it would not safeguard land for reinstatement of the railway link: consultations had shown, said general manager Jeremy Smalley, it would not bring significant economic benefit to the area that would outweigh the extra investment needed to make it a reality.

Most people, he said, did not want it reinstated, they would rather have a cycle network.

The campaign went quiet, but the railway company has continued, with George Bailey and Chris Street as directors. Mr Edwards is a consultant.

It has linked up with Radstock Action Group to campaign for a return of the railway.

The relaunch of the campaign should get people thinking, said Mr Bailey.

He points to a Nottinghamshire scheme, where campaigners pushed for a connection between a small town and Nottingham, and finally got it.

"Nobody in that area was giving it support until it was there. Suddenly it was over-used and was extended," said Mr Bailey.

"People will not use a facility until it is available."

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