

The Agnita Express

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Sibiu to Agnita Railway - UK Supporters' Group

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UK SUPPORTERS' GROUP FORMED

September 2010 saw the centenary of a narrow-gauge railway in the once forgotten country of Romania. The delightful 2ft 6 inch gauge line had meandered through the verdant Hârtibaciu valley in Transylvania connecting the fairytale citadel of Shigoshara with the bustling town of Agnita before terminating in Sibiu, the 2007 European city of culture.

The line had survived the fluctuating boundaries caused by wars and the domination of powerful political forces. It had run unperturbed by the bloody overthrow of Nicolae Ceausescu in far away Bucharest. It continued to contribute to the everyday life and needs of the local people - these remained the same whoever was in power in the capital.

Right up to September 2001 the twice daily 'mixed' left Agnita for Sibiu where it engaged with the main line via a dual gauge track before entering Sibiu's main line station.

However the price of progress eventually caught up with this gem of a narrow gauge railway and like the UK experience some 70 years previously the economic reality of motor cars, buses and lorries finally forced its closure.

But all was not lost; Romania too has its railway enthusiasts. People who understand what the loss of a legacy means, people who appreciate the heritage of their country's railways and people who wish to celebrate the achievements of railways in binding together the culture and customs of a people and a region.

Determination and perseverance are universal qualities which characterises all of us who wish to preserve the past in the face of bureaucratic indifference and Romanians are no exception.

The history of their efforts with its success and failures is told on page 2, but now it was time to celebrate - to toast 100 years of



Bill Parker, flanked by the Mayor of Agnita and Mihai Blotor - President of 'The Friends' addressing the crowd whilst the train and its coach await in the background.

service to the community and to look forward to the next 100 years.

Close connections had been established with our hosts. Their efforts had been helped by two UK-based organisations - The Mihai Eminescu Trust under the leadership of Jessica Douglas-Home and the New Europe Railway Heritage Trust led by their chairman Stephen Wiggs. Individuals too had played their part with Bill Parker of The Flour Mill adding both enthusiasm and finance, and Georg Hovecar providing a steam locomotive for the event.

Following a visit to Wales in 2009 by 'The Friends' of the SAR' an invitation was issued to attend their centenary event. Organised by Stephen Wiggs, a party of eleven left Luton for Sibiu on September 23rd for a four day visit. The full report of the visit is available elsewhere, but so impressed was the party both with the potential and the enthusiasm that it was unilaterally decided to show support for our Romanian friends by the establishment of a UK supporters' group - this newsletter is the Group's first production.

A Brief History

The original 2ft 6 inch narrow-gauge line ran from Sighisoara to Sibiu via Agnita traversing the length of the Hârtibaciu valley, a total distance of 68 miles (110 km). There was also an 8 mile (13km) branch from Cornăţel on the main line to Vurpar.

Construction started from Sighisoara, which was then in Hungary, in 1895. By 1898 the line had reached Agnita, a distance of 30 miles (48 km), but it took another 12 years to construct the remaining 42 miles (68km) to Sibiu.

In 1965 the original Sighisoara - Agnita section was closed and dismantled, due to its fierce inclines and sharp curves, which made it difficult and expensive to operate.

The line was also lifted from the streets of Agnita and a new terminus built 2 miles (3 km) outside Agnita, in the direction of Sibiu. The rest of the line, from Agnita to Sibiu including the Vurpar branch, was modernised with an emphasis on freight handling.

The Sibiu to Agnita section finally closed on 1st September, 2001. However the track remains in situ, although it has been breached in various places. Sadly, many of the buildings have been vandalised or removed.

Narrow gauge railway preservation in Romania

Preservation

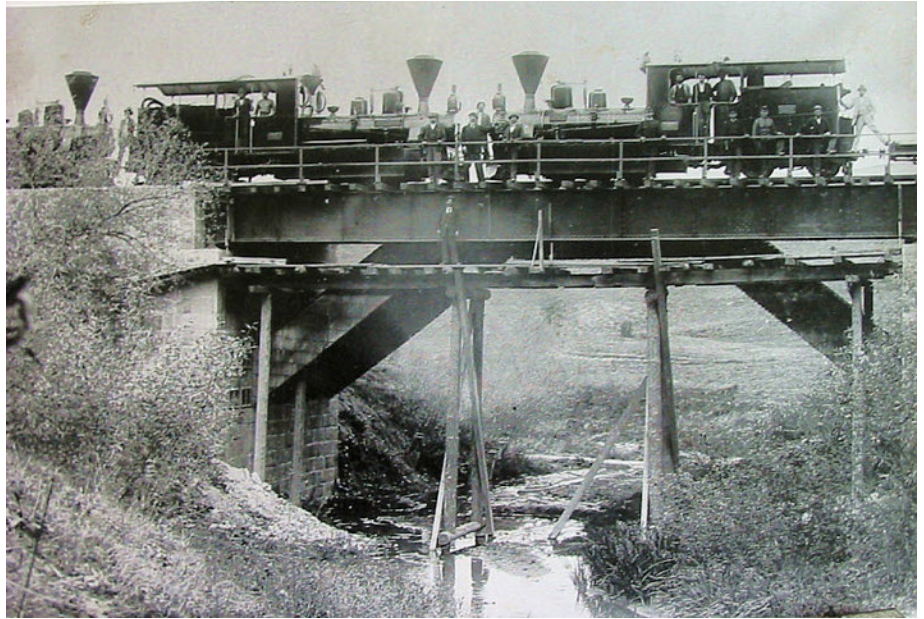
The line is now owned by SAAF ('The Railway Assets Administering Company'), which holds it on behalf of the State.

In 2006 an informal organisation was inaugurated by local enthusiasts to try and secure the future of the line as an integral part of Romania's railway heritage. The line is known locally as The Mocănița and so the group adopted the name 'Friends of the Mocănița'

In June 2007, following pressure from 'The Friends' the Sibiu Department of Culture announced that the Sibiu-Agnita Railway, together with the branch line to Vurpar as well as the station buildings and bridges on the Agnita-Sighisoara section had been officially declared an 'Historic Monument'. This gives the railway a legal status which effectively preserves the line and makes possible its revival.

On the 12th February 2008 a Consortium (Sibiu-Agnita Inter-community Development Consortium) was established for the sole purpose of taking over the railway. The Consortium is a publicly owned and run body which has powers to receive state-owned assets.

On the 1st Aug 2008 a contract was signed between the line's owners (SAAF) and the Consortium which effectively leased the line to the Consortium for a period of 25 years. The contract is for the line only, and does not include the buildings or other assets. However it does provide a window of



opportunity that should enable 'The Friends' or the Consortium to apply for EU grants.

Membership of the Consortium includes the Hârtibaciu Valley Association, the "Mihai Eminescu Trust" and the Sibiu Department of Culture. An invitation to join has been extended to Sibiu County Council as well as other councils along the route of the track.

A set back occurred on the 5th Nov 2008 when the SFT – the Romanian Tourist Railway Company which owns the rolling stock on the SAR – decided to scrap the lot. This included five diesel locomotives, six carriages and one heating wagon. However, the 'Friends' managed to save four of the carriages, although these had been damaged by the efforts of the scrapmen. These have now been secured

and cleaned by 'The Friends' and plans are being made for their restoration. The Mihai Eminescu Trust was prominent in helping to rescue the carriages and thanks to their help and the prompt action of 'The Friends' a set of original coaches will be available when services resume. One of the diesels, now moved to another part of Romania, and the heating wagon were also saved by a third party.

Photographs

Above - Testing a bridge between Sighisoara and Agnita circa 1898'

Below : Tourist train heading for Sibiu in the 1990s

THANKS TO :-

The Mayor of Agnita, Radu Curcean, whose idea it was to restore the line, who started the project and who remains actively involved.

Bill Parker of The Flour Mill who has been to the forefront in providing both financial help and encouragement as well as railway engineering expertise.

Stephen Wiggs and members of NERHT who fanned the glowing embers of restoration

FEDECRAIL whose help and encouragement was a vital ingredient in illuminating the possibilities.

Mihai Eminescu Trust and its tireless chairman, Jessica Douglas-Home, who applied financial aid just when it was needed.

