

Your letters



Rail 'underspend'

According to press reports Network Rail had an estimated £850million underspend in 2004-05, said to be the equivalent of the total spend on the strategic highway network.

I had not been aware Network Rail was keeping so far below its budget and I wonder if the monies, if not spent in the year, are lost as happens with budgets in some other areas of public expenditure.

If so, Network Rail should certainly take the blame for failure, since there is no shortage of works awaiting expenditure, for example expanding capacity on the Oxford-Worcester line, expansion of Birmingham Moor Street and reinstating crucial links around the country.

*Alan D Crowhurst, 1 Mawley Court,
Lower Inhedge, Cleobury Mortimer,
Shropshire DY14 8AH
alaneadc@aol.com*

Essential links

Am I the only person in the world who uses trains regularly and who does not object to the use of mobile phones or to the installation of TVs on trains?

My profession requires that I am on 24-hour call, so a mobile phone is essential. The on-board TV programmes, apart from the "celebrity news", are of reasonable quality and they are improving.

I work on the train or read a newspaper and I have fewer problems in concentrating when on a TV train than when I have to travel on the "St Trinian's Train", the one which carries hordes of allegedly highly intelligent children to a local school. They squeal and shriek at the tops of their voices.

My younger colleagues at work cannot understand why I travel by public transport. On the rare occasions when they use the trains they do not object to others using phones or indeed to the presence of the TVs.

These are our future passengers. Discourage them at your peril. We are Railfuture not Railpast.

*Roger Corbett, 11 Shire Ridge, Walsall
Wood, Walsall WS9 9RA
corbettroed@yahoo.co.uk*

TV horror

I was horrified to read about the im-

position of TV on trains. I commuted for 42 years and still travel regularly by train and I, like many others I am sure, wish to choose what I do, particularly on a long journey: read, chat with friends, study, sleep, or merely gaze out of the window. TVs on trains could drive some people back to driving where they can choose to listen to the radio or travel in silence.

*Janice Uphill, Paines Lane, Pinner,
Harrow, Middlesex HA5 3BX*

Totalitarian TV

I believe the imposition of television and especially television advertising in trains will simply put people off travelling by train.

This fact, however, the train companies do not want to hear.

Commuters, in particular, of whom my wife is one, generally see the train journey as a buffer zone between work and home in which they do their own thing to make the journey more enjoyable. Totalitarian television would prevent this enjoyment.

Train Guard (name, address withheld)

Taunton-Barnstaple

Jeremy Lane in *Railwatch* 103 asks for the Taunton to Barnstaple line to be reopened and says that, "most of the line is there".

This is largely true at the Taunton end, but 10 miles of the former railway have been turned into the A361 trunk road between South Molton and Barnstaple.

The need for the South Molton route is probably most felt when the existing Crediton route has been closed by flooding or Network Rail engineering work.

Bus replacement services for Barnstaple are a familiar sight at Exeter St Davids, but they also are for Plymouth.

The second route to Plymouth via Okehampton only needs 21 miles of re-laid track, but all too often hundreds and hundreds of people are forced to travel by bus instead of train.

If we cannot get the Plymouth line reopened, what realistic hope is there for a second route to Barnstaple needing 43 miles of restored track and removal of the trunk road? Therefore, we reluctantly

consider that reopening of the old Barnstaple to Taunton line is ruled out by the road problem, the length of restored track needed and also the low intermediate population served.

Instead our current campaign objective is the improvement of the Barnstaple to Exeter service to run hourly, and through to Salisbury and Waterloo.

This development would improve connections at Exeter for journeys such as Barnstaple to Bristol.

However, a future objective might be to consider direct trains from Barnstaple to Taunton and Bristol using a new chord at Cowley Bridge.

The journey time to Taunton could be as little as one hour five minutes, assuming 75mph running on the branch line and stops at Umlerleigh, Eggesford, Lapford and Crediton. This would only be 10 minutes longer than the old direct route, also run to a theoretical 75mph line speed with stops at South Molton, Dulverton, Morebath Halt (for Bampton) and Wiveliscombe.

It would not help Dulverton and Wiveliscombe, but for Barnstaple it would be almost as good as having the old line.

It might even benefit South Molton as Umlerleigh station is only about 15 to 20 minutes away by road.

*Gerard Duddridge (chairman,
Railfuture Devon and Cornwall),
Higher Exwick Hill, Exwick, Exeter
EX4 2AW*

Virgin under fire

I recently suffered my worst experience with Virgin Trains yet, trying to book and reserve seats from Oxford to Bishop Auckland via Darlington. There seemed to be a deliberate attempt to avoid reserving seats for us, putting me on "hold" etc. I understand that the rail users consultative committees no longer have any say in the complaints procedure. Is this true?

I have been unable to download the Railfuture news, but would like to be put in touch with a local Rail Development Society group. Would you be able to help please?

*David Eldridge, 4 Ock Drive,
Berinsfield OX10 7PR
deldriddg@waitrose.com*

Editor's note: The local rail passengers committees are on their last legs, having been abolished by the Government - with the exception of the London Transport Users Committee. Most of them have already held their final meetings.

Passengers are still expected to take up their complaints with the train operating company, in this case, Virgin Trains, 58 Smallbrook Queensway, Birmingham B5 4HA. But if passengers still feel

aggrieved, they can now complain centrally to the Rail Passengers Council, Freepost WA1521, Warrington WA4 6GP or on 08453 022022.

On a more general note, Railfuture is worried that the Government wants the new-style RPC to be a toothless watchdog.

Railfuture's website was indeed out of action for about a week in late May, early June. Apologies, it was beyond our control.

Save our train

In May 1994 North London Railways, part of British Rail, started a shuttle service between Willesden Junction and Clapham Junction. It began hesitantly, but with stops at Kensington Olympia and later at West Brompton, coupled with electrification, the half-hourly service became very popular, especially with commuters.

When the railways were privatised, Connex South Central, on their own initiative, introduced a direct service from Rugby to Brighton, using this new link line. Some of the trains called at Harrow & Wealdstone. But Rugby was a station too far and the terminus now, for the service run by Southern Railway, is Watford. All the trains call at Harrow. Recently the peak hour trains, which, with one exception, terminate at Clapham Junction, have been scheduled to call at Wembley Central.

This began to become of real interest to Wembley residents. We have an hourly train service which by-passes central London and can reach East Croydon, Gatwick Airport and Brighton more quickly than by any other mode of travel.

Enter the Strategic Rail Authority! Last autumn it prepared a draft rail utilisation strategy for the Brighton main line which recommended that the service from Watford should be withdrawn south of Clapham.

The argument was that the four-car trains did not make the best use of the available train paths. South of Clapham the Watford trains carried fewer passengers. But no account was taken of the stop at Wembley.

Brent was left off the consultation list. Luckily, Gerry Devine, the principal public transport officer of Brent, heard about the proposal and submitted a comment to the SRA, drawing attention to the regeneration of Wembley and asking that, far from curtailing the service, it should be increased in frequency to half hourly, with more of the trains calling at Wembley Central.

The importance of calling at Wembley has also been argued by Councillor Phil O'Dell of Harrow whose letter in the *Harrow Times* first drew my attention to the SRA threat to the Watford Brighton service. Unlike Brent, Harrow had been consulted. The present position is this. The consultation ended on 3

December. The final recommendations covering all Brighton line services are now with Alistair Darling, the Secretary of State at the Department for Transport.

Although the recommendations are confidential (why?) it would appear that the service beyond Croydon is still under threat. Mr Darling's decision was expected in April. This will not be the end of the story. A new timetable could not start before next year and will be subject to negotiation with the train operator. So there is still time to write to our MP Barry Gardiner.

Any resident who feels like trying the Watford-Brighton service can obtain a timetable from South Kenton and have a day out in Sussex – or maybe just in Croydon. Compared with the shaky Bakerloo trains or the shabby Silverlink, the Southern Electrostars are a revelation of air-conditioned smoothness. This train service is worth saving.

Transport for London will press for the retention of the service south of Clapham Junction.

David Pearson, 56 Windermere Avenue, Wembley HA9 8RY
pearsonwinder@waitrose.com

Dutch example

I've just returned from a week cycling in Holland where stairs to station platforms are typically complemented with tracks up the side to allow you to push a bike up.

Being fully laden with two panniers and camping kit it took a bit of effort to get up and felt a little unstable coming down, but the unburdened locals seemed to use them with grace and agility.

As the cost of installing a track should be relatively cheap, maybe we should campaign for them in Britain.

Andrew Rodgers, 13 Gowlett Road, Peckham, London SE15 4HX

Cycle protest

In *Railwatch* 103, you published an article entitled "French cycle of success" about the new French AGC Regional trains claiming to be able to carry bicycles.

Well to my mind hanging up a bike on a hook by its poor front wheel is no way to carry a bike!

I had the bad experience of this on an English Adelante train, where one is forced to do this to a bike, due to the mean-spirited cramped design of the designated area.

To a serious cyclist with a proper touring bike loaded with two panniers this was a most stressful experience. I had to first unhook my carefully attached panniers, and then somehow find the strength to heave my bike on to this horrible high-up hook. This could also cause potential damage to the bike's front wheel.

I've got no illusions about this new breed of train operators. I know they only want to make as much profit as they can, and so, into their trains, they attempt to cram as many bodies as they can. Space-consuming things like cyclists just eat into their profits and so cy-



Pictures: BOMBARDIER

The AGC train and, inset, the latest version of its rubber-fronted cousin for the Oresund link between Denmark and Sweden

Danish success

Your article entitled "French cycle of success" amused me. The AGC regional express train was developed not in France, but in Denmark, based on the IC3 diesel multiple unit and the ER4 electric multiple unit, and in co-operation with British Rail. It was designed to provide a train which could run for long distances but stop at many towns and junctions en route, which in Denmark are on average 20 miles apart.

Designed by Jens Tougaard, the first three-car diesels were tested in 1989, with computer-control, Gresley-style bogies, automatic couplings and air-cushioned rubber noses, designed for speedy splitting and joining of trains.

By 1991, all Danish inter-city trains were IC3 and were widely welcomed by passengers, with average speeds, including stops, of 70mph and a top speed of 110mph.

By 1995 there was a 25kV electric version with better

acceleration than the diesels.

The Danish parliament has decided to electrify all main lines but by 1999, Danish engineers had devised a way to run the diesel and electric trains in multiple formations. I believe this is unique in the world.

By 1997, a two-car diesel version was being produced – at Derby – for private railways.

A dual-voltage version was also produced for through running between Denmark (25kV) and Sweden (15kV).

The French AGC pictured in Railwatch is basically an IC3 with low-floor like the IC2 but with a closed, instead of rubber, nose.

The electric version is between 40-60% more fuel efficient, depending on whether the power station exploits its waste heat or not. In Denmark, all power stations produce district heating from waste heat.

Erland Egefors, Denmark
egefors@yahoo.dk

clists are quietly and insidiously designed out of the system. Make things so difficult for them and then they'll stop coming (and using up all that profitable space with their bikes!). Incidentally, there are cyclists and there are passengers, and the former is considerably inferior to the latter. So the French don't seem to have succeeded any more than the British.

Catherine Barber, 24 Firgrove Court, Hungerford, Berkshire RG17 0DD
kate@catbarber.plus.com

Tsunami plea

On behalf of Redeem, the mobile phone and printer cartridge recycling company, I would like to say a heartfelt thank you to everyone who has given their support to our recent Tsunami Recycling Appeal. Readers have helped us to raise over £5,000 for the Disasters Emergency Committee's Tsunami Earth-

quake Appeal. Those who donated were one of over 100 companies and more than 1,900 individuals who helped out the appeal.

We asked the public to send us their old mobile phones and empty printer cartridges to be recycled – and in return we pledged to give money to the DEC. We are delighted with the response so far, with our total currently standing at £4,300 – and as a company deeply committed to its charity work, we have contributed a further £700.

This money will go to areas affected by the disaster via the DEC's member agencies, with the DEC ensuring it reaches those who need it most. The Disasters Emergency Committee is appealing for outstanding donations to be banked, so if you requested a freepost bag to donate a mobile or cartridge, please endeavour to return it as soon as

possible. Although the Tsunami Recycling Appeal is coming to a close, there's still plenty of opportunity to help charity and the environment through recycling. Why not recycle to raise funds for one of our other partner charities? Many of the UK's charities felt an impact on their funds when public attention was diverted to the tsunami disaster – so now's your chance to help them out.

Our partners include Marie Curie Cancer Care, Royal National Institute of the Blind, Children's Hospice Association Scotland, Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, Northern Ireland Hospice Care and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Whether you want to make a one-off mobile phone or cartridge donation, or you want to make regular donations from your workplace (which we collect free), we'd be delighted to hear from you. All you have to do is visit www.recyclingappeal.com and choose a charity, or call 08712 50 50 50.

Rob Morton, Corporate Responsibility Executive, Redeem plc
robm@redeemplc.com

Inching forward

I become a pensioner this year, but to get a decent job I found I needed to know metric. Rail vehicles and track maintenance are metric these days, and so are new light railways and the Channel Tunnel rail link.

So please continue using metric with the odd mile (in brackets) thrown in where required. We are promoting modern day travel.

Colin 'Inky' Hills, 59 Oak Tree Drive, Totteridge, London N20 8QJ
inkyhills@waitrose.com

Answers please

You have been kind enough to publish a couple of my letters in *Railwatch*. Each of them was ended with a question mark but you have not found the time or space to publish an answer. I am tempted to ask whether or not you have access to railway industry sources to obtain information, or do you rely upon your readers' own contributions to fill your columns?

John Pearson, 2 Mercers, Hawkhurst, Kent TN18 4LH

Editors' note: We welcome letters but cannot answer every question. The letters page is mainly for readers' views and discussion. We also welcome news items and articles. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect Railfuture policies. Send your letters to The Editors, 4 Christchurch Square, London E9 7HU. If you have access to email, please use email to save us extra work transcribing material.



Railwatch continues to carry the mail train logo on our letters page. About a million letters a day are currently being transported by train in a "test" to run until March 2006. Before the service was axed by Royal Mail in 2004, trains carried 13million letters



Waverley route

The partial reopening of the Waverley route is to be welcomed. Peter Rayner makes the point that the semi-autonomous status of Scotland, together with the fact that the Secretary of State has to satisfy his Scottish constituents, means that the Scots get a much better deal than the rest of us with railways. This point has been made several times by the *Private Eye* correspondent, Dr B Ching.

Speaking of the good doctor, Peter is wrong to blame the closure of the Midland and Great Northern on Dr Beeching. The closure took place in 1959 when the doctor was safely ensconced at ICI.

Although its loss is to be regretted I don't think it can really be called a tragedy as there was, at the time, an alternative route for most journeys.

Peter Fleming, 23 Lovers Walk, Dunstable, Bedfordshire LU5 4BG

Editor's note: Sadly there are now large areas of Norfolk remote from the rail network. And the bus has signally failed to replace the benefits offered by the train.

Appalling service

My son is based at RAF Cosford and needs to catch two trains to get there from Coventry. For one journey he checked the National Rail inquiries website which gave the departure time as 21.15.

When we arrived, we found the actual departure time was 21.04. As a result, I had to drive him to Cosford, a 90-mile round trip.

The ticket clerk at Coventry told him always to ring as the website is often wrong. When I suggested he should complain, he said: "What's the point. It's a waste of time."

I also have a colleague at work who used to cycle to Nuneaton, take the train to Coventry, then cycle into work. The train has been replaced by a bus service, so he now uses his car for a 40-miles-a-day round trip.

*Pete Stewart, 1 Limbrick Avenue, Tile Hill, Coventry CV4 9EX
pstewa@jaguar.com*

Editor's note: This is unforgivable "service". The saddest thing is that rail workers know there is little or no management response to complaints from either within or without. Some rail managers should hang their heads in shame. I have also attempted to make complaints and been told by rail workers: "It is better you write in. They don't take any notice of us." One result is that the ticket machine at my local unstaffed station, Cambridge Heath, has been out of order for more than six weeks, despite repeated requests for it to

be repaired. Notices pointing out the penalties for travelling without a ticket have however been put up throughout the station.

Timed out

A word of warning to those who rely exclusively on National Rail Enquiries Online when planning their journeys

On page 13 of *Railwatch* 103, I mentioned the useful pedestrian link which exists between the SWT Alton-Waterloo line at Ash Vale Station and the FGW Gatwick-Reading line a few minutes away at North Camp. I have since discovered that National Rail Enquiries Online, to its credit, mentions it too, but grossly exaggerates the walking time involved, suggesting 50 minutes instead of the 10 or 15 required. Anyone therefore planning a journey "on line" which includes this link could be seriously misled.

One example: Morning travellers from, say, Alton or Farnham en route to Gloucester or Cheltenham Spa can catch the 07.14 at Alton and be in Reading by 08.27, which gives them ample time to catch the 08.47 for Gloucester. But National Enquiries Online, by inflating the walking time to 50 minutes, will give their arrival time at Reading as 08.58, which misses the connection altogether, a serious matter when trains from Paddington to Gloucester and Cheltenham are so few.

*Professor Brian Thomas, Appleford, Station Road, Bentley GU10 5LA
brianthomas@f2s*

Vote Green

Much has been said about apathy at the election. Low turn-outs are not just the result of apathy. The Green Party is a viable alternative as the only party with sane transport and environment policies and the only party capable of saving Scotland and the UK from an environmental disaster – more roads and runways.

The congestion charge debate in Edinburgh and the disastrous decisions by Labour and the Lib-Dems, supported by the Scottish Nationalists and Tories, to build the M74 motorway extension is proof that the Greens are the only party with any concern for the environment and the promotion of public transport. All the other parties now take the Bush line on Kyoto.

The best way to expose this hypocrisy is to vote Green. Members of the other parties who are concerned about pollution should consider resigning.

Douglas G Smart, former secretary Railfuture Scotland, 15/2 Bellfield Avenue, Musselburgh.

Trams for dogs

Dogs are supposed to be man's best friend. They can be carried with no problems on trains, ferries, local buses, London Underground and Tyne and Wear Metro but not, for



Trump cards for passengers

I have heard much about various new ticketing schemes proposed for London (Oyster card pictured top right) and elsewhere and wonder if that to be used in London will resemble the scheme in use in New York.

I enclose a sample Metrocard purchased during our recent visit (pictured above left), one of a number that we bought as we had not established how to recharge a card by the time we came home nor had we tried.

Purchase was simple with a machine with a user-friendly screen enabling the passenger to select one day, seven day or one month cards and with payment by coins, notes or credit cards. There were some limitations on the size of banknote that could be used in excess of the sum payable.

Having obtained a card we found that we could travel anywhere within the city using buses and the subway. The card was inserted into the machine by the bus driver. Similarly the card could be inserted at the subway barriers anywhere. At a cost of about £3.50 for one day the Metrocard proved to be an excellent way of travelling around the city. I have never ridden on so many buses before as in New York. It is one city which lends itself to articulated buses in view of the long, straight and very wide avenues and streets most of which were used by one or sometimes two routes thus reducing demand on space at bus stops. On the line we

used during the final part of our stay I was very impressed with the track layout on the subway, which ran as an elevated railway in Queens, which had a third track. This was used by inbound express trains with limited stops during the morning rush hour and by outbound trains in the evenings which appeared to be very popular.

Not everything was impressive however. There were a number of rather odd people riding the trains and the Metrocards were not always accepted at the first, or second, attempt although this problem only seemed to arise at subway turnstiles and not on the buses.

*Alan D Crowhurst, 1 Mawley Court, Lower Inhedge, Cleobury Mortimer, Shropshire DY14 8AH
alaneadc@aol.com*

Editor's note: London's Oyster card is a great step forward for passengers, particularly on the Tube and the buses.

But we still have to wait for Network Rail and National Rail operators to provide Oyster card readers in all their London stations.

Alan also recommends the Amtrak NE 15-day pass which is available from agents in the UK for visiting New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston and Portland, Maine.

However, Amtrak's cross-country routes, including the service between Chicago and New Orleans, are threatened by proposed US government cuts. 31 states would lose all their passenger rail services. This is the country that will go to war to protect its oil supplies – and its gas guzzling drivers.

some reason, on some of the new tram systems now operating. I have written to the organisations concerned and received courteous replies (except Birmingham who did not reply at all), but no good reason for the dog ban has been given. We all hope these new tram systems are successful, but this unnecessary restriction is reducing their usefulness.

D A Herring, 27 Knapton Lane, York Y026 5PX

New steam loco

Considering *Railwatch* 103 is dated April 2005, I was tempted to think that the report of a new steam

locomotive with a maximum speed of 125 mph (high-tech steam for a new age) was an April Fool joke.

Yet really, what is the point of going back to steam? Building replicas like "Tornado" for the enthusiast market is one thing, but that isn't the concern of Railfuture.

Besides, if "a loco could be produced within 10 years", who then would have the experience of working with commercial steam? I'd rather stick to encouraging electric traction, not dwell in the past.

*Tim Mickleburgh, 33 Littlefield Lane, Grimsby, DN31 2AZ
timmickleburgh2002@yahoo.co.uk*