

No go area for rail travellers

A large area of Britain became a no-go area for rail travellers during the 1980s, thanks to penny-pinching.

The 35-mile Norfolk line to Fakenham from Wymondham was allowed to wither and die because no-one could or would find the £250,000 needed to keep it going.

While millions of pounds of public money are now being spent in the county on new roads, volunteers are struggling to bring back the trains themselves - after 17 years of toiling in a hostile political climate.

Following the oil crisis in 1974, RDS helped set up an action committee to work for the reinstatement of passenger trains on the Wymondham, Dereham and Fakenham route.

British Rail quoted £274,000 as the price for bringing the passenger trains back. But instead of jumping at what was a bargain basement offer, the county council was not prepared to consider it.

Desperate to save a few pounds here and there to meet tough government guidelines, BR closed the line to passengers between Ryburgh and Fakenham in 1980.

Volunteers enthusiastically set about raising cash to buy the track but they could not raise enough money in time.

The freight service of grain, fertiliser and building materials continued until 1988. BR was again under tremendous pressure to save cash and it lifted the track north of Elmham. Then, sin of sins, it sold off parts of the trackbed, dashing hopes of reconnecting Fakenham to the rail map.

Now volunteers are aiming to reinstate trains on the track that is still in situ between Wymondham and North Elmham. A new Great Eastern Railway company has been formed and is negotiating with BR to buy the 16 miles of track for a reported £1 million.

A share prospectus will be issued to raise the estimated £300,000 needed for refurbishment work.

The company hopes to run a commuter service and is confident that at least 300 people a day would use the trains to get from Dereham to Norwich (with a change to BR at Wymondham). In the summer the company hopes to run steam trains for tourists and there will be museums at Dereham and County School.

Ultimately there are hopes that the company can run trains as far as the market town of Fakenham and even to Wells next the Sea which lost its passenger service in 1964. But as managing director Trevor Cleaver said: "That would cost a few million pounds."

And because planners have not protected the linear right of way, some sections might have to be constructed from scratch.

In Cambridgeshire, councillors are protesting that BR has not kept promises to improve services. Instead there have been cuts to local trains from Ely, Kennett and Dullingham giving a "third-rate" service. *Meanwhile billions are being spent on the roads.*

The Department of Transport is keen to justify its



GATEWAY TO NOWHERE: Dereham station with the tracks still in place but rusting fast. Another monument to the short-sighted politicians who have allowed our national rail inheritance to crumble away for want of a fraction of the taxes which they spend on roads.

proposals to build new roads on the grounds of safety but its idea of safety seems to exclude pedestrians and cyclists.

Villagers at Ovington, Norfolk, want a footpath alongside the bypass being planned for their village in 1993.

They have been told a footpath must be dealt with separately from the bypass. The real reason for building a bypass of course is to speed the flow of traffic along the A1075 Watton - Dereham road.

Just to buy the land necessary for the road, the planners are prepared to spend £1.2 million and to use compulsory purchase orders.

In another part of Norfolk, another £20 million bypass will cut the village of Terrington St John in half and pose a serious hazard to pedestrians.

The parish council of nearby West Walton has warned: "In the next decade, with the increase in traffic, no pedestrian will be safe to cross the road." But the department has come up with an

amazing answer. Project manager Godfrey Koll told a public inquiry in Wisbech that pedestrians would find it safer to cross a dual carriageway than the existing road, because they would only have to look in one direction at a time.

Most of the annual 5000 people killed on the roads are pedestrians. In Norfolk alone, 1990 road accidents are estimated to have cost £90 million.

Rather than speeding up traffic, the Department of Transport, local councils and the police should be getting together to devise ways of slowing it down.

Research has shown that cyclists have a 90 per cent chance of escaping death in a crash with a vehicle travelling at 30 mph. But they have a 90 per cent chance of being killed if that vehicle is travelling at 38 mph.

For more information about the Great Eastern Railway plans, contact Trevor Cleaver, County School station, North Elmham, East Dereham, Norfolk.

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TALK BACK: A report of an RDS meeting with Regional Railways director Gordon Pettitt and his new planning and marketing manager Paul King is available from the general secretary (enclose an sae). We also hope soon to meet the marketing manager of BR International.

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