

Your letters



Direct Link North

I hope your readers will look at the website <http://www.directlinknorth.com> which is trying to secure serious consideration for our proposal to create a new high speed motorway-type passenger and freight railway, with Continental-sized loading gauge, linking the major industrial regions of Britain with each other and with their Continental markets.

I have encountered reluctance by Government ministers to address issues which only Government can decide:

■ Is such a railway needed to satisfy the nation's transport needs?

■ What would be the advantages to Britain of having one and disadvantages of not having one?

■ Would retail activity be permitted around its proposed 25 regional rail ports similar to that at airports and would consequent development gains accrue to the railway?

■ Is there any likelihood of parliamentary and planning procedures being streamlined?

Without answers to such questions, which only Government can provide, industry and financiers cannot be expected to spend serious time and money on the proposal, attractive though it may appear.

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Soccer fans

I recently attended my first RDS meeting, an AGM of the Lincolnshire Branch. And I must stay I was impressed with both the turnout, and the fact that organisers had managed to get three relevant speakers to come along.

Given the opportunity to pose questions, I thought I'd raise the issue of soccer supporters being allowed to purchase alcohol from trollies early in the morn-

ing. After all, it is excessive drink which invariably leads to them behaving badly, and making journeys unpleasant for other passengers.

I was told however that only the police have the powers to make a specific train "dry", and that it would cause problems telling the catering operators what they could or could not sell. In other words, a combination of the profit motive and over-cautious police tactics are helping to make Saturday rail travel something of an unpleasant experience for many.

Why don't they simply bring back the football specials, and segregate the troublemakers from the rest of us? Of course they can prevent individuals from travelling, but that would be too much to ask!

Tim Mickleburgh, 33 Littlefield Lane,
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Train to Calais

Does it not seem somewhat ironic that the Government is giving vast sums of money to Railtrack when the whole idea of privatising the rail network was to stop it being a burden on the public purse?

Also, is it not strange that one can travel by car, lorry or coach via Eurotunnel from Folkestone to Calais – but not as a train passenger?

RA Smith, 67 The Street, Little
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Renationalise option

I realise there is much support among the rail unions and, indeed, some members of RDS for renationalisation but while I agree there is much that is and has been mismanaged by the current train operators and Railtrack, do we really want to go back to the time when every purchase had to be sanctioned by the Treasury?

It is important, I think, to avoid putting down the current organisations at every opportunity

and I would refer to the article by Peter Rayner in *Railwatch 87* in which he says: "What sort of a mess are they making of the services to and from South Wales by Craven Arms?" Does he mean the route that continues through Ludlow and on to Newport or the cross country route to Llanelli and Swansea? In the former case the services are quite good and the line managers advise passengers of delays where these occur and the Wales & West management regularly meet with rail user groups. I do not use the line frequently although I do attend most rail user group meetings and because of this I am left wondering to what Peter is referring.

That there have been some problems of capacity is undoubtedly true but this is due to the signalling systems left by British Rail with over-long track sections which reduce capacity. However, with the probable removal of much of the steel traffic after the rundown at Newport the problem is going to be reduced without the expenditure that should have been made a decade ago when BR was running down its services.

The Heart of Wales route was threatened with closure on occasions over the years and does now require a better service in areas where it provides a lifeline for remote communities, but with continuing delays in re-franchising nothing will happen in the near future.

A strategic plan for such routes in advance of re-franchising would be a worthwhile activity for the SRA but it would seem that that body will continue to be reactive.

In closing may I enquire upon which stock exchange Railfutures are going to be traded?

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Reopening

Although the Taunton-South Molton line does not serve large centres of population, its reopening would be valuable in putting this remote area within reasonable reach of rail facilities, and form a spine for local bus and other community transport services.

Use of cars could be reduced, in number and length of trips, and a sensible transport policy would allow the North Devon link road where it occupies the route into Barnstaple to be converted back to a railway line, as

well as reopening the lines to Ilfracombe, Halwill Junction and Lynton. All closed railways should be protected. Lines which might not be considered candidates for reopening now will come into their own as economic and environmental circumstances make road transport unviable. Protecting lines need not make land economically sterile until reopening. Temporary use can be made of trackbeds as paths, with station and yard sites used for storage or caravans/mobile homes which can be easily moved when the line is reopened. Many old stations are happily preserved in other ways, such as private houses.

Where lines are already obstructed, the developments will not be listed or have much intrinsic value and can be replaced on a different site to allow the railway to reopen. Where roads occupy former railways, a sensible transport policy will allow them to be converted back to rail, as such roads were built to cater for excess road traffic which is not desirable or necessary.

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Closure objection

I have written to the DETR to object to the proposed closure of the Croxley Green branch.

I object to the following "proposals":

■ "Proposal" to discontinue (rail) passenger services between Watford Junction and Croxley Green.

■ "Proposal" to discontinue the use of the network between Watford High Street Junction and Croxley Green.

■ "Proposal" to terminate the use of Watford West and Croxley Green Station.

The "proposals" are *ultra vires*.

To propose a closure when closure has already taken place is both illogical and illegal. Notional plans of the Hertfordshire County Council and other bodies for new rail works were and are irrelevant to the matter of illegality. Also irrelevant are statements concerning infrastructure and operating costs at the time of the illegal physical severance in 1996. To describe an absence of rail services since 1996 as a temporary suspension is an abuse of language.

During the illegal closure of Pendleton Station in Greater Manchester a fictitious closure date was produced by the Treasury Solicitor, who had no

standing in the matter. Pendleton, however, set a dangerous precedent for closure by neglect at the whim of the Treasury of any part of the railway system without recourse to statutory procedures.

Given the traditional malignity of the Treasury to railways and its fondness for roads, I think that the precedent should not be reintroduced by the illegality of the severance between Watford High Street Junction and Croxley Green. As with Pendleton, so with the present *ex post facto* "proposals"; the proposed date of closure (18 June 2001) is disingenuous and fictitious. I therefore ask that the railway be reinstated; that a train service be reintroduced along the entire length of the branch; and that no closures be contemplated until the necessary restorations are complete.

Professor G L Huxley, Forge Cottage, Church Enstone, Oxfordshire OX7 4NN

Lottery loser

Some days rail travel is more chancy than the National Lottery. Frequent train cancellations are not helping to restore confidence in rail travel. Train operators should do all they can to eliminate delays or the railways will get a bad name that will be hard to shake off.

L Griffiths, 12 Rainsborough Gardens, Market Harborough, Leicestershire LE16 9LW

Joined up railway?

I recently travelled from Kent to Wokingham. Rather than go into London, I went Tonbridge-Redhill-Reading, a much more pleasant journey. I noticed an overlap between Redhill and Reigate and asked where best to change.

The staff at Tonbridge very helpfully checked and advised me to change at Redhill since the train arrived there at 17.50 but did not leave until 17.56, after the Reading train at 17.53.

We waited a few minutes outside Redhill station and pulled in at 17.53. I stepped out just as the Reading train moved off a few yards across the platform. I expressed my annoyance to the person who had just waved the train out, almost certainly in full view of the Tonbridge train coming in.

She was completely unsympathetic and said "we are not allowed to hold trains now". I suppose that is because she works for Connex and the Reading train is run by Thames Trains. What price common sense? The cross-platform con-

nection I made was obviously intended from the timetable. In fact if you look at the map, a chord at Redhill would make that route a good way for Channel Tunnel traffic to avoid London and go via Reading to the West, but I have never heard it seriously debated.

*John Harrison, 2 Murdoch Road, Wokingham, Berks RG40 2DA
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Priorities for action

As a new member of RDS, I was very interested in the November issue of *Railwatch*.

Regarding the West Midlands, I have some suggestions, mainly reversing the discredited closures of the Beeching era. The Chiltern line service, the old GWR route to London from Snow Hill, via Solihull, Leamington and High Wycombe was restored by Adrian Shooter, and has been developed. The doubling of the remaining nine-mile single line between Bicester North and Aynho junction south of Banbury is urgently required, and should, I believe, be a high priority.

Another priority should be the restoration of the four-line track between Birmingham Moor St and Lapworth, 11 miles. The trackbed is available although two widened bridges will need to be constructed where the track passes over new roads, east at Bordesley, and at Monkspath Hall Road, Solihull.

The local councils ought to pay for these bridges. The car park at Acocks Green, lightly used, could be reduced in size, and that at Widney Manor shifted to a nearby open space. Both were built on former tracks.

It is not possible to operate a successful West Midland suburban service from Snow Hill station in the rush hours in conjunction with fast trains with first stop Solihull. Currently there is a gap of 20 minutes in trains stopping at Olton between 06.20 and 17.40, and between 06.00 and 18.25, hardly an attraction to use trains instead of cars. There are too-wide gaps between stations in the South Birmingham-Solihull area. Thus there is a nearly two-mile gap between Olton and Solihull.

There should be an intermediate station at Grange Road, Olton, and one at Bentley Heath, but this depends on restoring the four-line track. On the Stratford-

on-Avon line there is a similar excessively long gap between Yardley Wood and Shirley. A new station at the Robin Hood bridge is necessary.

Improvement of the Chiltern line by replacing the four-line track would only be a fraction of the cost of doubling part of the route from Birmingham to Coventry used by Virgin line trains to London Euston.

Another useful innovation would be an entirely new line south of Solihull to the Birmingham International station via Catherine de Barnes, mainly in open country.

Part could be constructed above the M42 motorway using central pillars. I have seen this in outer Chicago in the USA.

If connected from both north and south, this proposed line would enable through trains to operate from Birmingham International (and airport) station to Stratford-on-Avon, very useful for international passengers.

In this area, consideration should be given to reopening the line from Leamington Spa to Rugby. I believe the track still exists from Daventry. Unfortunately part of the former track south of Leamington has been sold for industrial use and several miles of diversionary track would need to be placed to join the old trackbed with reconstruction of some bridges.

Stratford-on-Avon, where on a summer Sunday the roads are packed solid with cars, has been particularly badly hit by rail closures.

This includes the former GWR main line to Cheltenham, now partly a restored steam line, the east-west routes to Northampton, now partly converted to a bypass road at Stratford, and Stratford to Alcester, connecting with the West. Perhaps some of these might be considered for reopening.

I could mention several improvements in the outer London area but this letter is long enough.

Henry Warson, 26 Blythe Court, 4 Grange Road, Solihull B91 1BL

Useful idea

Martin Cook's suggestion in *Railwatch 87* for running Cotswold Line trains to Marylebone (or at least some of them), when the Oxford-Princes

Risborough line is reopened, is a useful idea.

Many Cotswold passengers travelling to Reading will still want through trains via the Thames Valley line. As the High Wycombe route to London is about six miles shorter than the main line via Reading, the journey time should in theory be about the same.

Back in the 1950s there used to be one train a day by this route, the 11.30 from Oxford to Paddington. It took two hours five minutes, partly because it stopped at all stations to Princes Risborough, and then High Wycombe, West Ruislip and Greenford. On 28 March the Thames Valley branch committee had a meeting with SBB Laing to discuss the refranchising of Thames Trains, and we mentioned this suggestion for Worcester to Marylebone trains.

Although the SRA has not yet invited bids for Thames Trains, SBB Laing, which has already obtained the franchise for Chiltern Railways and is bidding for Wessex, is ready to welcome ideas for its proposed bid for Thames Trains.

The SRA has said it wants to reduce the number of franchises but there is no advantage to be had in having unconnected train operating companies in different parts of the country, such as First Great Western and First North Western, under the same ownership.

SBB Laing hopes to obtain the franchises for a connecting group – Chiltern, Thames and Wessex – to exploit the advantages of through running between the three companies, to introduce new strategic services and achieve economies of operation. It would make good sense if the Stratford-on-Avon and Leamington to Kidderminster, Worcester and Hereford services could also be incorporated in this grouping.

One suggestion in Martin Cook's letter which I must disagree with is his proposal for a south-to-east curve at Kennington Junction. Only 200 yards after branching off the main line, the Cowley branch crosses the Thames on a substantial girder bridge at an acute angle and it would be impossible to construct a triangular junction here without building another bridge across the river. The number of passengers wanting to travel from Didcot to High Wycombe would not justify the cost, and it would be uneconomic to run trains which bypass Oxford.

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Letters should be sent to:

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Your letters extra

Central Railway

While it was pleasing to see MP Kelvin Hopkins (*Railwatch* 87) vigorously pushing for more freight by rail using the proposed Central Railway line and the Channel Tunnel, that must be years away and I had hoped his party would have done more by now to tip the balance to rail freight in the short term.

Sadly its recent changes to lorry taxes, capitulation to pressure for even bigger lorries, and a promise to provide more road capacity, often dressed up in the past as "bypasses", have all pushed in the wrong direction, not helped by, some say, an unsympathetic Railtrack.

It would be good to know from Central Railway some operational detail.

For example, is it sensible from energy considerations to transport, as seems to be intended, the deadweight of the entire lorry from say Liverpool to Lille. Does the driver stay, inactive, with it for the journey?

Wouldn't it be better to restrict it to containers which would require a smaller loading gauge or is their long-distance "rolling motorway" concept the only realistic way to get freight off our motorways on to rail?

John Davis, 41 Fairmead Avenue, Harpenden, Herts AL5 5UD

Uncollected fares

On two occasions I have had to join the train at Feltham without a ticket on my way back from Heathrow, both in the evening. In one case I had no time to get a ticket without missing the train and in the other I had inadequate coins and notes that the machine would not accept.

I expected to pay on the train but was not asked to. On the first occasion I spoke to the guard as I got out at Wokingham, but he shrugged his shoulders.

On the second occasion the guard passed through the carriage and said he would come back but never did.

This week I took a morning rush hour train to London. There was a long queue and the machine would not accept my notes.

I had a meeting so could not afford to miss the train and got on, again expecting to pay on the train. I saw no guard, so at Waterloo I asked a staff member on the platform where I could make myself legal. He pointed down the platform.

At the barrier there was no ticket inspection, but there was another member of staff so I asked him. He looked distinctly

embarrassed and said I could go through the barrier and buy a ticket if I wanted, but it was up to me. If honest folk find it so hard to pay, how many others exploit the situation I wonder, and how much revenue is lost?

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Info breakdown

The "information breakdown" article in *Railwatch* 87 highlights a crucial area where the railways are often failing their passengers.

More importantly these failings must deter those trying rail travel for the first time. How are they to know what is going on when information is lacking? I recently arranged to meet a friend travelling on a Manchester-Cardiff, train due at Newport at 11.27.

The arrivals display showed that the train was "on time".

When no train arrived, I was directed by booking office clerks to a Help Point on the platform where I was told precisely what had happened. A unit had failed on the Central Wales line, and another forming the Crewe-Shrewsbury shuttle had been commandeered to rescue it.

The Manchester-Cardiff train was terminated at Shrewsbury to work to Crewe in place of the commandeered unit, leaving long-distance southbound passengers to await the next service from Shrewsbury an hour later.

The staff member who I spoke to via the Help Point said his office was linked to the TRUST system which gets its data from the signalling system and is constantly updated.

First Great Western controls the displays at Newport from its office in Bristol. The arrivals monitor was still showing the 11.27 being "on time" more than one hour later when I left the station.

I had to agree with a member of staff who said: "£6million worth of equipment that's not used properly."

This incident also raised other questions, such as why does a major rail centre such as Crewe have no spare stock and no locomotive available to rescue a failed train? OK, such resources sitting around cost money but so do delays to trains.

One might also ask why a long-distance Manchester-Cardiff train was taken out of service to provide a relatively short-distance shuttle from Shrewsbury to Crewe. These questions need to be answered properly if the

railways intend to provide an acceptable service.

*Roy Caston, 22 Pentrepoeth Road, Bassaleg, Newport, Gwent NP10 8LL
Heathrow decision*

It has been suggested that the Government will give the go-ahead to Terminal 5 at Heathrow once the General Election is safely past. Furthermore, whatever denials may be being made now, it seems as though a second runway at Stansted will be on the agenda in a few years time.

It is essential that new rail links are planned and constructed so as to ensure adequate access to the country's major airports as these are developed. I know that RDS has already made constructive suggestions as to how this could be done, but three particular areas of need come to mind: ■ Provision of rail access to Luton Airport from Milton Keynes, Northampton and the West Midlands. A glance at the map will show the role that could be played by the Luton-Dunstable line if this were reopened through to Leighton Buzzard on either former or new alignments.

■ The need for access to Stansted from the west. Living west of the capital, I do not find it convenient to have to use the Underground to get to Stansted. In the same way that rail access from the east is being explored, the case for a new link towards Stevenage and beyond needs to be considered as part of airport expansion plans.

■ Improving access to Birmingham Airport (and Britain's second city) from the east by reopening the Peterborough-Rugby and Northampton-Bedford lines.

Far fetched? At one time, maybe, but I don't think so now, especially as new links to these airports would also make rail a realistic option for many other journeys.

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Thameslink Daysave

The other day in our local tourist information centre I picked up a leaflet on the Thameslink Daysave ticket.

This seems an excellent promotion as for £8 one can have unlimited off-peak travel on

Thameslink (there are also group rates etc.). I had only recently travelled to Brighton from Luton on a Saturday and, even using a railcard, it cost about £16. So it is an excellent promotion. It is also to be found on their website. But this ticket has to be booked in advance, it cannot be bought at the station or on-train. It is available from "selected outlets" (in practice tourist information centres at Bedford, Luton, Dunstable and Brighton). What is the logic in having a good product and making it so inaccessible?

*Peter Fleming, 7 Station Road, Dunstable, Beds LU5 4HS
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Corner cracks

I have tried without success to find out about gauge corner cracking. Until answers are forthcoming, I am just not travelling by rail. There must be hundreds of others like me.

Godfrey Nall, 3 Briar Coppice, Cheswick Green, Shirley, Solihull, West Midlands B90 4GD

Branch borders

I suggest Swindon be re-allocated to Thames branch and that the remainder of Severnside should be shared between South Wales and South West.

Eric Beint, 118 Lydgate, Harle Syke, Burnley BB10 2DU

Wonderful idea

The Strategic Rail Authority's proposal to reopen the Woodhead route, along with a new Sheffield Victoria station, would tie in neatly with the current south TransPennine service to Doncaster and Grimsby-Cleethorpes. Such marvellous ideas. Will they ever come to fruition?

Peter J Gray, 10 Shelley Grove, Sprotborough, Doncaster DN5 8BX

Potential

The potential of the Bedford-Northampton line (*Railwatch* 87) may or may not have a future but any appeal for funds should include some idea of what type of study is contemplated and the likely consultant.

How does one know if it is money well spent? Studies are about potential use and operating costs as well as engineering costs.

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Railway Re-openings Blueprint

ISBN 9539515-0-2 From bookshops or by post. £10.75 from Celerity Publishing, 10 Sandringham Road, Didcot OX11 8TP
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