

Put Beeching in reverse

Just look at the map on the right and you realise why so many people are forced to rely on their cars. Often there is just no alternative with so many rail stations closed.

The comprehensive basic public transport infrastructure which did exist has been dismantled by politicians and officials who had no mandate to do so.

But even now the railway, starved of cash and hobbled as it is, is performing a massive social and economic function far beyond what it is credited with.

In many places the railway infrastructure remains and new life could easily be breathed into it.

If technical advances, like diesel multiple units, automated level crossings and modern signalling had been embraced with vigour in the 1960s, as the Railway Development Society then advocated, many of the Beeching victims could have survived.

Even now, many former rail lines could be reinstated, sometimes as light rail lines, to help fill in the many gaps in the public transport network.

While there is still virtually unrestrained car use, the bus will never be able to provide the reliable service necessary.

At present it often cannot deliver you to the railway station comfortably and on time.

Government efforts to improve bus services can only be welcomed. They are absolutely essential in both city and country areas.

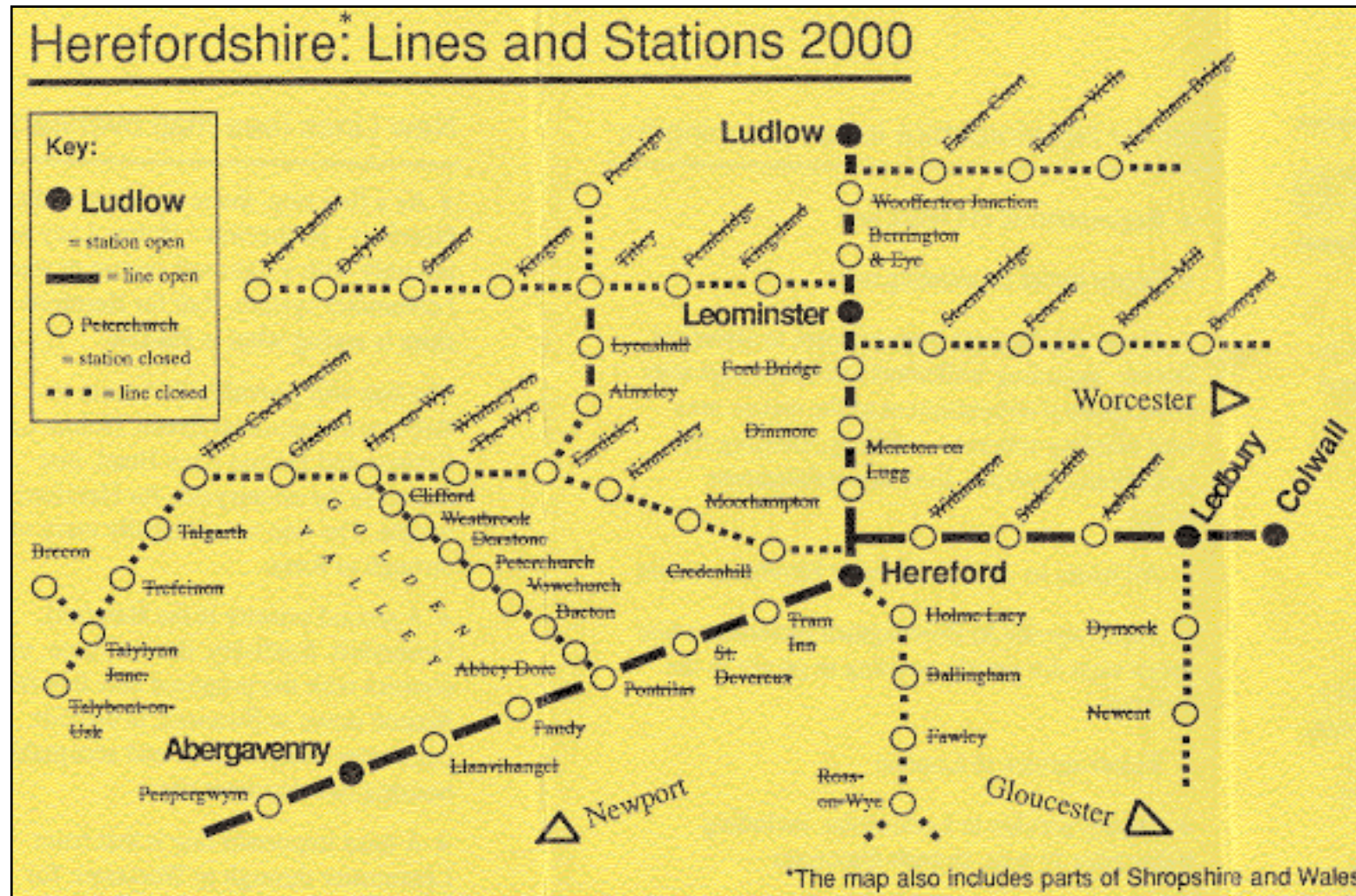
But trying to replace rail lines with guided buses is doomed to failure and the powerful players in the rail industry, like train operators, Railtrack and the Strategic Rail Authority, are failing to make the case for rail even when it is so obviously the best local, regional and national choice.

Take the case of Cambridge, where a half-baked multi-modal study has recommended converting the Cambridge-St Ives line into a busway.

Apart from Railfuture and other campaigners trying to make the case for bringing the line back into the national rail network, there has been silence from the official rail spokesmen.

In fact Railtrack has collaborated with the people trying to convert the line into a busway, the SRA has said nothing and the train operators have not explained how reinstating the line could enhance their own and other operators' services.

But not one train operator has come forward to run trains on the line,



What a shocking state of affairs: This map shows how many communities in just one county have lost their access to a rail service since Beeching did his worst. The potential for the former rail network shown on this map, produced by Rail for Herefordshire, to form the basis of an integrated public transport system, must be obvious to even the densest planner or politician.

because the current privatised system provides no incentive for a train operator to expand the network.

What kind of an inquiry is it when half the argument is not being put? So let us put it. The line should be reinstated and electrified and extended to the East Coast main line so that it can be reintegrated into the national network and the East-West rail project.

If a busway is deemed necessary, a much more direct and simple way of providing it would be by reserving a lane on the soon-to-be-expanded A14 road.

Guided buses are usually not capable of more than around 40mph while even on a branch line rail speeds can safely be 70mph or more.

Everywhere in the world that guided busways have been tried they have proved more expensive than thought and have not lived up

to expectations. They are expensive follies. Almost everywhere that railways have reopened they have exceeded expectations.

Cyclists - remember the Government's "commitment" to integrated transport - can take their bikes on trains but not on buses.

The weakest link of the guided bus is that it will immediately get bogged down in traffic when it comes off its reserved track.

If restored, the railway would provide access to the Science Park at Histon, the rail station at Cambridge and every station on the rail network, including Stansted Airport and London - a real alternative route to work for many commuters.

When problems arise or maintenance is needed on the East Coast main line, the St Ives line could be a useful diversionary route.

In the 1960s 80 trains a day were

timetabled on the line. The demand is still there. Traffic is now forced on to the road.

Repeatedly, the public has voted for railways to be reopened but planners and politicians ignore them and try to implement guided bus schemes. Just who is getting a benefit from this approach? At a recent public meeting in St Ives not one member of the public spoke in favour of the busway. They know it won't work.

A similar situation exists at Luton and Dunstable where the public wants the rail line reopened. Again Railtrack, the train operators and the SRA have failed to get together and quickly get Dunstable back on track, or even to put any sort of argument for rail.

Instead, bureaucrats and some politicians are trying to impose yet another flawed busway on the public. If you want to hear the latest on the Cambridge battle, email jerry

alderson@convergys.com and ask him to put you on the list to receive regular news updates.

Railfuture is also supporting a wider campaign to put Beeching in Reverse which is the title of a new report from TR&IN this month.

It calls for a national programme of line and station reopenings. If you would like a copy send £10 (£6 for rail user groups) to TR&IN, Brian Jackson Centre, New North Parade, Huddersfield HD1 5JP. Make cheques payable to TR&IN.

A national conference is being staged by TR&IN in Nottingham on 27 September. A few places are available to Railfuture branches at the subsidised rate of £25. Details: 01484 549737. Fax: 01484 544234. Email: train@platform8.demon.co.uk

A mock trial of Dr Beeching takes place in the evening of 26 September at the Galleries of Justice in Nottingham.

Regulator acts to protect rail land

Land crucial to railway development will be protected in future, following a decision by Rail Regulator Tom Winsor to change Railtrack's network licence.

Mr Winsor took action after listening to arguments put forward by Railfuture and other campaigners who wanted a Rail Lands Protection Act.

Announcing the change in Railtrack's licence, Mr Winsor said: "Parts of Railtrack's property portfolio may be required for the future development of the railway and should be retained for that purpose."

"My proposed modification plugs an important gap in the regulatory framework and, in important cases of land disposal, requires Railtrack to obtain my specific consent. I have also published my proposed criteria for giving consent on a case-by-case basis."

"It is important that the process strikes the right balance between proper protection of the public interest on the one hand and not imposing unnecessary limitations on Railtrack's freedom to deal with uncontroversial cases on the other."

For that reason, the new arrangements exempt from the controls certain cases of land disposal which should be allowed to proceed without specific regulatory approval. The process is streamlined and efficient whilst at the same time protecting important land for railway purposes."

Where Railtrack does need the Regulator's specific consent for a disposal, it must give him at least three months written notice. The Regulator will then consult interested parties before reaching a conclusion.

The Regulator decided to include all sizes of land after hearing from Railfuture, Strathclyde Passenger Transport and Wrexham County Council.

We pointed out that the sale of small parcels of land could have major effects on access, integration schemes and route reopenings. Rail land is often fragmented but is still useful for the railway although often of little value for anything other than rail development.

Railtrack has a strong commercial incentive to maximise income from property but at the time its licence was issued, Railtrack was expected to remain in public ownership. This would have in itself protected the public interest to some extent.

There will still be exemptions, for example, "land which has no reasonably foreseeable railway use".

The Regulator is also exempting 12 schemes which are on their way through, so it is



How safe? This is the trackbed of the former Dereham to Fakenham line soon after the track was lifted. Can the Regulator's rules save it for the future?

important for local campaigners to check the details. He has however refused to exempt schemes at Caldon Low and Salisbury. Railtrack will have to convince him that the land involved is not needed for rail development before it can be sold.

Railfuture and rail user groups will not have to be officially consulted about land disposals so rail campaigners will have to continue to be vigilant in future.

But the Strategic Rail Authority, local councils and passenger transport executives, train operators, the Rail Freight Group, the Freight Transport Association, the Rail Passenger Committees and the Health and Safety Executives must be consulted.

The publication *Notice of proposed modification to Railtrack's network licence: Disposal of Land* was distributed "widely".

The 28-day statutory consultation period closed on 31 August 2001. Rail campaign groups would be well advised to check it out.

A copy of the document is available from the ORR website (www.rail-reg.gov.uk) or from the ORR Librarian, Sue MacSwan, 1 Waterhouse Square, 138-142 Holborn, London EC1N 2TQ. Tel: 020 7282 2001. Fax: 020 7282 2045. email: rail.library@orr.gsi.gov.uk.