

Engineers must give operators a look-in

Railwatch readers will say that I am never satisfied because I am always questioning what is happening.

However, I make no apologies. The more I examine the actions of the Government the more I realise they are little different from the people who plunged us into the mess privatisation created on the railway.

Certainly Transport Secretary Alistair Darling, with his steady and determined manner, is as big a destroyer of our hopes and plans as ever Sir George Young (the Tories' safe pair of hands) was. The main difference, as far as I can see, is that Mr Darling does not ride a bicycle.

After privatisation the engineering muddle was obvious to anyone who understood the railway. It was ignored by Railtrack and by the Government until people were killed unnecessarily at both Potters Bar and Hatfield. The result was the creation of Network Rail.

Because of the manifest failures of engineering contractors, Network Rail has been packed full of engineers, some of them the same people that broke up BR's excellent civil engineering organisation.

So we have gone from the world of Railtrack, which had too many accountants and too many lawyers to, would you believe it, too many engineers!

Engineers cannot run railways and never could. They build and maintain railways. We are now in a world where all the talk is of engineering excellence as if that alone will put the railway right.

The ability to operate is lost wherever you look. Train regulation is a shambles, and information on stations a disaster. I stood recently on Long Eaton platform and had time to observe the confusion of traffic - short trains, expresses, semi-fasts. They were running out of sequence, late, with no attempt made to put the service right. Had our group - retired railway



Rayner's review

men returning from a reunion - not been there, the other passengers would have been getting on all the wrong trains to all the wrong destinations all over the East Midlands.

It is easy at Long Eaton for passengers to be confused about which trains to board.

On that day, the long line information system consisted of an announcement that a train was coming, not what the train was or even how late it was.

With Network Rail and the "engineering excellence" brigade at the helm the passenger can easily be forgotten.

If an inexperienced operator is conducting the "music", the railway will be given over to engineers to erect plastic fences, ensure adjoining lines are closed to protect worksites and generously give the whole thing over to engineering projects with little regard for the operation of trains.

There was always a debate on possessions of the railway for engineers. The most successful railway men of the past 50 years have been those that could reconcile the requirements of the engineer to maintain the railway while allowing the operation of the railway to continue. Gerry

Fiennes was such a man. A railway operator and a general manager, and he managed to improve operations and engineering to produce a better overall "product".

What is making matters worse today is the public pronouncements from the Strategic Rail Authority.

What were sensible train reduction proposals were wrongly portrayed in the media as "worse than Beeching".

The timetable was difficult to operate and I have previously criticised the bus driver mentality which has led to the running of frequent short trains.

The payment regime is based on sharing revenue so train operators have been rewarded for running unneeded services, all tripping over each other.

Recently, I was privileged to be able to discuss this foolish timetabling with John Spellar, the Minister of Transport, and I made the point to him.

Worse than that, Virgin CrossCountry produced a timetable horrendously impractical. Experienced railwaymen dismissed it as a joke even before it fell flat on its face on day one.

A flawed timetable and inadequate Voyager trains. What a mess!

Yet lo and behold on 28 January 2003, Virgin took top business travel award for the best rail network.

And what does Mr. Branson say?

"Our splendid team effort is changing what was once described as the worst railway in the world into the world's best."

I fear Mr Branson has no idea of how appalling his CrossCountry service is, and for him to have said the things that he did merely illustrates the fact that the industry sadly needs people who understand more about railways.

■ Peter Rayner is a former BR operations and safety manager.

News in brief

Electrification The final section of the Trans-Siberian Railway was electrified at the end of 2002. As a result, Russian transport officials are planning for a 40% increase in traffic on the 6,000-mile long route. "Experts" at Britain's Strategic Rail Authority believes electrification is irrelevant. They are wrong.

Study time Distinguished academics Philip Bagwell, John Armstrong and Peter Lyth are tutors at *Transforming Our Transport*, a three-day residential course at Barlaston, Stoke on Trent, from Friday 9 to Sunday 11 May 2003. The cost varies from £51 to £100 depending on status and accommodation required. Information: 01782 372105. Fax: 01782 372393. email: wedgwood.college@staffordshire.gov.uk

New platform An organisation called Platform 11 has been set up in Ireland to campaign for the development of the threatened rail network. It says Ireland should have a railway network to be proud of to benefit the entire nation by protecting and developing an "environmentally sustainable, social and economic asset". Website: www.platform11.org

Reopening battle Campaigners calling for the reinstatement of the Lewes-Uckfield line are redoubling their efforts following the Strategic Rail Authority's failure to give the go-ahead to the project which would create a third main line to the Sussex coast and relieve the London-Brighton line. They say the South East England Development Agency has recently joined the long list of individuals and organisations which support the idea. They believe the SRA has now become a "bureaucratic monster which has lost the plot" and has exaggerated the cost of reinstating the line.

Natural choice Reopening the old Midland Railway route from Matlock to Buxton is long overdue and for an estimated £80million would re-create a strategic rail link from the North West to the East Midlands, as well as providing first-class local links. Derbyshire County Council has now appointed Scott Wilson Railways to carry out a 12-month feasibility study, partly to look at the line's impact on nature conservation.

Lottery winners October: Bill Stoneham, Maidstone £56, K Gascoigne, Lapworth, Solihull £35, S J Vatcher, Teddington £21, W Emmerson, Belfast £14, C Rayner, Enfield £7, M Peterson, Acton £7.

November: Joan Rustrick, Whitehaven £80, Alan Everett, London N16 £50, David Stocks, Sheffield £30, P T Handford, Eye, Suffolk £20, P A Wilson, Horsforth £10, F R Strutt, Birmingham £10.

December: Jeffrey Cross, Bury St Edmunds £80, D Tonsend, Oxford £50, S G Kay, Edinburgh £30, D Pippard, Yeovil £20, P H Ludlow, Budleigh Salterton £10, David Peters, Wellington, Telford £10.

January: Paul Wilson, Flackwell Heath £64, E Ratcliffe, Bournemouth £40, S Turk, Gloucester £24, M Bedford, Fareham £16, G Larkbey, London E17 £8, A J Macbeath, Grange-over-Sands £8

February: H L Cook, Reading £40, A S Cleveley, Birmingham £25, J W Page, Cambridge £15, B J Hastings, Scunthorpe £10, S F Simms, Walsall £5, D J English, Poole £5.