

# Your letters



## Dream shattered

I was really looking forward to travelling on a lovely new sliding door Adelante train recently, instead of having to endure the horrible slamming of doors on an old train, but I was to be sorely disappointed.

I had my (very well loaded) bike with me, and was horrified to find that not only was the space allocated to (three) bikes most inadequate, but that I had to first unload my two panniers, and then hang up my poor bike vertically by its front wheel!

I am not particularly physically strong, and the guard, most grudgingly, had to do this for me.

All new trains are designed by beings who clearly never cycle themselves, and run by beings who baldly admit they dislike cyclists and bikes – because these “waste valuable space” and so reduce profit.

All these otherwise nice new trains need is a good guards van, like trains used to have.

*Catherine Barber, a disillusioned cyclist and train-user,  
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## Short answer

Tony Millinger (*Railwatch* 95) is right to condemn Birmingham's hopelessly out of date transport system. The current modal split for the city is car 51%, bus 31%, Rail 17% and Metro 1% so there is a huge potential for rail to take a larger share.

The problem is how to cater for more passengers; and whatever is done with the tracks and services more passenger capacity will certainly be needed at New Street.

However, the West Midlands has some of the shortest commuter trains in the country; two or three coach units are normal and only the Silverlink electric trains are longer. This means that with judicious investment in longer trains the network can easily offer a 50% increase in

capacity.

Many of the routes converging on New Street already have a reasonably frequent service although the Chase Line north of Walsall is still only hourly. Unfortunately the best opportunity to divert Walsall services into Snow Hill by way of a new chord at Wednesbury and a quick sprint along the former Great Western main line was lost when the Metro tracks were laid along this route. An alternative – the Benson Road chord – is now said to be too expensive.

One option to relieve capacity at New Street might be to decrease the current six trains per hour Cross-City frequency – substituting new four or five coach units running at 15 minute intervals. It may also be necessary to “think out of the box” and actually timetable some Virgin Cross Country services via the Camp Hill line to avoid Birmingham; using this direct route from Kings Norton to Sattley and Tamworth. This would free up paths on the very congested West Suburban line through Bournville, Selly Oak, University, Five Ways and also benefit the genuine long distance passengers that Virgin now wishes to attract.

*Peter Cousins, 8 Giffords Croft,  
Lichfield, Staffs WS13 7HG*

## Doubtful advice

All supporters of railways will have been, at the very least, disappointed to hear about the proposed termination of remaining contracts to carry mail by train (reported in *Railwatch* 96).

The “consultants” who advised Royal Mail on this course of action are apparently owned by New Zealand Post. They do not seem to be very good and have been criticized in their own country and elsewhere for their poor advice and lavish lifestyle.

They did not, apparently, consider all the options offered by EWS and the national audit office may be involved.

So maybe sense will prevail after all. Never forget that this

decision was taken by Royal Mail, that genius outfit which decided to change its name to Consignia and then, six months later, back again. (The costs for this must have run into millions). So anything could happen.

*Peter, Fleming, 23 Lovers Walk,  
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## Trainspotters

Peter Rayner is right to criticise the Network Rail spokesperson who said trainspotters were a security risk. However, according to *Rail* magazine, this was speedily refuted by senior Network Rail and train operator sources who basically agreed with what Peter was saying and said that trainspotters were welcome provided they acted sensibly.

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## New rail costs

In his comment column Michael Weinburg (*Railwatch* 96) laments the the malaise affecting the railways and our country. He gives the example of the failure to contemplate building five miles of underground route in nine years, while Madrid has been able to build three miles of metro in little over three years.

I agree that rail projects take an inordinate amount of time, but it is the cost that should concern us even more. Look at the cost of the Channel Tunnel rail link, working out at a mere £76million a mile. Of course we are talking state-of-the-art high-speed rail here, but how were the French able to extend the TGV line to Marseilles recently at only £26million a mile? Another example is the West Coast main line improvement – not a new line, just a refurbishment. The original estimate of £2billion has ballooned to £10billion. This final figure is simply an outrage. Who is responsible for the original estimate, and how did they get it so wrong?

The existing tram route in Blackpool, 12 miles long, is to be modernised, and the cost is estimated to be a whopping £140million. As an indication of how high this is, let me tell you about the Simplon tunnel, which is, in fact, almost the same length as the Blackpool tram system. The floor of the tunnel has had to be lowered, the track renewed, and the water channels reconstructed. This took 13 years to do, but the cost was less than £30million. You may know

about the recent proposal to upgrade the Blaenau to Llandudno freight line. A tentative early estimate was that the 28 miles could be made suitable at a cost of £2million, or £4million with provision for passing loops. But a later estimate suggested that the track would need to be relaid in its entirety, and the total cost would then come to a total of £20million. A five-fold rise, but still within the bounds of some kind of reality. But then a senior Network Rail manager later put the estimate at between £15million and £230million! This is disgraceful both for the obscurity of the higher figure, and also the wide range of the estimate showing that the manager does not have a clue what he is talking about.

If the cost of merely renewing rail is going to be so high, it is hardly surprising that ministers are looking to find ways of reducing the spending. They would be failing in their duty if they did not. My own view is that we need to have fixed-price contracts so that civil engineers will be tied to building or renewing rail at the original cost estimates.

Nothing will be done to solve the country's transport problems unless and until someone puts a stop to these cost overruns.

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## London links

We are told (*Railwatch* 96) that Crossrail should not be compared with Paris's RER network. Why not? How many cars clog the M25 and other routes because of the inconvenience and discomfort of having to change to and from the Tube for cross-London journeys?

It should be possible to connect every London radial route to a cross-London route by using a combination of the West London Line, Thameslink 2000, Crossrail, the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, and a new route between Aylesbury and Southend which would use Tube tracks between West Hampstead and Bow. Other proposals to reduce M25 traffic would include Central Railway, which would provide a western orbital route for passengers as well as catering for freight.

In the south, we could use the North Downs Line; in the east, add-ons to CTRL would complete a Romford-Croydon/Gatwick route; and in the north, I would suggest a light railway linking the towns on the A414 corridor. Incidentally, if a



successful Olympic bid did manage to hasten urgently needed rail projects in London such as Crossrail (and I share Michael Weinberg's incredulity that this couldn't be done if we so wished), is there a danger that it might hold back equally urgently needed projects elsewhere?

Simon Norton, 6 Hertford St, Cambridge CB4 3AG  
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## National railcard

Although supporting the idea of a National Railcard, I view with alarm the idea that other railcards, including the Senior Railcard, might be merged into it.

One of the major benefits of the Senior Railcard is Virgin's policy of allowing Saver Tickets to be used on all trains, including those at peak times.

If there was no longer a separate Senior Railcard, I can't see how this arrangement could continue and I hope that you will not advocate this aspect of the scheme.

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## Website failings

Yet again the National Rail Enquiry Service website falls flat on its face!

Trying to plan a simple week-day journey from Basingstoke to Portsmouth it can only cope with the route via Eastleigh and when the equally common route via Woking option is put in it just comes back with the gobbledegook excuse page.

When will this longstanding ongoing total shambles be sorted out?

When will I get a proper response to all the other complaints I have made about this pathetic site. I want to know when things will be sorted out.

The website may well be a "top 10 hit" website but most people go to it because they cannot get the information at closed station booking offices/travel centres.

The Basingstoke travel centre now closes at 17.00 (earlier on Saturday).

Even then it is sometimes closed because of "staff shortages".

Robert Holliday, Parsons E & C, 4th Floor, EMC2 Tower, Great West Road, Brentford, Middlesex TW8 9AZ  
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## Station apology

I refer to the report in *Railwatch* 97 "No trains from this station".

**Rail Rover**

Class	Ticket type	Price
STD	FLEXI ROVER	£41.00 X 22APR03 8128
Valid until		Number
28 APR 03		5497088939-42
Issued at	Validity	Valid
MANCH PICC TR	AS ADVERTISED	888A7D
Available		
NORTHWEST ROVER 3 DAYS IN 7		
23	24	25
04	4	4

## Rail bargains

**It is possible to make some big savings by buying a Ranger or Rover ticket rather than a normal return ticket. This is probably why train operators do not publicise them very well. A Ranger is usually a day ticket and a Rover is for a period longer than one day.**

**The Freedom of the North West Flexi Rover, pictured above, for instance can be used for any three days over a period of seven days.**

**Price: Flexi Rover (3 in 7 days): Adult £41.00, Child £20.50, Railcard holder £27.05.**

**Seven-day Rover: Adult £51.00, Child £25.50, Railcard holder £33.65.**

**Area: Routes to Carlisle from Barrow, Dumfries, Lockerbie and Hexham. Also area bounded by Settle-Carlisle line, Barrow, Morecambe, Blackpool (both), Southport, Shipley to Bradford, Leeds, Halifax, Oldham, Manchester, Liverpool, Warrington Bank Quay to Helsby, Chester, Shotton, West Kirby and New Brighton.**

**Valid: After 09.00 Monday to Friday. By any train Saturdays, Sundays and bank holidays.**

**There are also Rover or Ranger tickets covering North and Mid Wales, the Lakes and Furness area, and Coast and Peaks.**

**Family tickets are available for one or two adults with up to four children.**

**More details on the Mid Cheshire Rail Users Association website at [www.mcrua.org.uk/RangerAndRover.htm](http://www.mcrua.org.uk/RangerAndRover.htm)**

The lack of poster information at London Fields station concerning engineering work for 17 May was totally unacceptable. Posters had been produced and should have been distributed to all stations affected. At this late stage it is virtually impossible to establish what went wrong, but I would like to apologise to all passengers who were so inconvenienced.

Since May we have installed a poster board specifically for engineering work and I have tightened up the procedures for poster display. This board is in the subway entrance to the station on the right. We also have Customer Help Points on the platforms, giving passengers direct contact with our Control Centre. Incidentally, these were

at the station in May. Customer information on Wagn is a priority and at London Fields station this is very much improved since your report.

Gary Finlayson, Retail Manager  
Wagn - West Anglia, Hertford House, Cranwood Street, London EC1V 9QS

## Take responsibility

I note that, following the Hatfield rail crash, senior employees of Railtrack and Balfour Beatty are to be prosecuted for corporate manslaughter.

I also note that on 9 July the Transport Secretary announced a massive increase in spending on roads which will inevitably cause more deaths through road accidents and respiratory ill-

ness. Several commentators have suggested that the Government has adopted this policy to avoid upsetting the motorist majority among the electorate, in spite of the safety consequences.

In view of the similarities can we expect Alistair Darling and the Prime Minister to be similarly prosecuted for the effects of their policy?

Stuart George, 67 Madeira Road, Ventnor, Isle of Wight, PO38 1QZ  
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## Lazy drivers

A *Railwatch* 96 article asked why more people did not travel by rail and concluded that rail fares are too expensive.

Another reason is that car drivers are too lazy.

But cost is a factor. The Government should stop giving support to motorists but put up petrol tax to pay for more public transport. We need more new stations, like Chandlers Ford.

David Giles, Flat One, 36 Winn Road, Southampton, Hants SO17 1EQ

## Green way

The Environmental Transport Association has a new scheme to encourage more membership.

For those who don't know, ETA does a breakdown service just like the AA or RAC, but unlike the AA/RAC your money is not going towards lobbying for more roads but rather goes towards campaigning for more environmental transport.

ETA is very supportive of Railfuture and had an article in their recent magazine about the National Railcard.

The scheme runs as follows: If a member recommends someone, that person gets 50% off ETA membership (£46 for roadside assistance). In return, the member who suggested the name gets a £10 credit (ie not cash) on their ETA account.

So if you want affordable breakdown cover which doesn't support the road lobby, you are welcome to email me with your address and the date your breakdown service is renewed. I will then submit this to ETA, and they will send you out a pack. If you join quoting the reference number you are given, then you can join at the reduced level.

For more info on ETA goto [www.eta.org.uk](http://www.eta.org.uk)

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# Letters Extra

## Dubious policies

The Strategic Rail Authority has withdrawn support for the Bristol-Oxford service which called at Didcot. This has caused considerable inconvenience to users and destroyed the Government's claim to reducing road congestion.

Yet if 11 miles of mothballed line between Steeple Claydon and Blechley were reopened it would link up hundreds of miles of existing rail lines.

For instance, the combined mileage from Barnstaple and Weymouth via Yeovil Pen Mill and Peterborough to Skegness and Lowestoft is 475.

The small cost of reopening 11 miles of existing line would bring vast benefits, even judged only on the increased number of journey opportunities.

Nor can the Government claim it is short of funds when it has announced £10 billion spending on new roads.

But local authorities are also to blame. Oxfordshire has adopted a policy of minimising commuting. It can do this by blocking line re-openings, Thame, Fairford/Witney, Great Central, Wantage Road but does not prevent commuting by car.

It has also chosen not to spend money on railways. Why are local authority civil servants in the south of England consistently anti-railway?

Lyndon Elias, 10 Sandringham Road, Didcot OX11 8TP  
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## Good news

I am disappointed that *Railwatch* denies us news from Severnside branch. For many years, it would seem that the Taunton, Cheltenham, Swindon triangle has been ignored.

*Railwatch* 96 mentions the part-implementation of Railfuture proposals last year to John Spellar. Perhaps you could publish more details.

For example, the new platform four was completed at Swindon in July.

Railfuture recommended this last year and I think it is worthy of mention, perhaps even a photograph.

Eric Beint, 118 Lydgate, Burnley, Lancs BB10 2DU

**First Great Western reports:** The new platform opened at Swindon on 2 June 2003, resulting in an immediate improvement in punctuality, particularly on routes to South Wales and Bristol which call at the new platform. Richard Bowker, chairman of the Strategic Rail Authority, officially opened the



*This is the logo of the Bedford-Blechley Rail Users Association which would benefit from the reopening of the line from Blechley to Claydon.*

*For the first time since the 1960s, people from Bedford would be able to re-establish contact with Oxford. In the Sixties, people from Bedford could travel to both Oxford and Cambridge by train. Many would like to do so now if only they were given the chance.*

platform on 16 July in a ceremony also attended by John Armit, chief executive of Network Rail. This new platform is also being complemented by a joint First Great Western and Swindon Borough Council scheme to improve the pedestrian route between the station forecourt and Swindon bus station.

**Editors' note:** *Railwatch* welcomes contributions. We depend on volunteers for reports.

## No more cuts

The most anti-social document ever published in this country was Dr Beeching's *Reshaping of British Railways*, published in 1963.

It was plain from then that the Government intended to cut investment and the network.

The then Conservative government and its Labour successor closed 18,369 route miles of railway. And 7,283 stations.

Then came the ravages of privatisation. As a former railman, I believe the way forward is to create no more than 10 independent regionally based companies.

The idea of substituting buses for rail services should not even be contemplated, particularly in a country like Wales, because of the terrain.

Mervyn Matthews, Llwyndewi, Capel Dewi, Carmarthen SA32 8AE

PS: As I am now 90 years old, I am hoping someone will take over the chairmanship of the Wales Rail Action Group.

## Correction

Many thanks for publishing my letter in *Railwatch* 96. There was however an editing error. The cost of aviation fuel is 17p per litre, not 1p. Congratulations on

the punchy content of the rest of the issue. I have passed the back page - containing the list of costly road schemes compared to the languishing rail schemes - to my MP, a Conservative, as an aide memoire if he wants to have a go at the Government at some time.

The Post Office's plans to transfer mail to road and air irritated me and I would like the full costs to be taken into account, including the environmental cost of night flights.

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

## Website confusion

In *Railwatch* 96, Peter Fleming mentioned [www.trainline.com](http://www.trainline.com) as a useful website. Actually it is Sony music. The useful website is [www.thetrainline.com](http://www.thetrainline.com)

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## Fast line

In the report on the conference in Birmingham which I attended, Mike Bennett is quoted as saying that it is possible to travel from London to Marseilles via Lille in a day. I think I can do better than that.

Last summer holiday in July we came back from Aix-en-Provence via Marseilles to Edinburgh in a day. The first section was by local train to Marseilles St Charles.

From there we travelled by TGV to Paris in three hours on time. Next we went across Paris to the Gare du Nord, where there was the usual hanging about before we boarded Eurostar to London. Again three hours.

Then things started to get more complicated. We went by taxi across London during a Tube strike and made it for the GNER train, but only just. We got into Edinburgh late. Still this was a feasible journey. I hasten to add

that it was fine doing this on the homeward journey. We would not have felt comfortable arriving late at our holiday destination.

Dr David Guild, 53 Grange Road, Edinburgh EH9 1TX

## Damn statistics

In the report of the high-speed rail conference in *Railwatch* 96, Jonathan Tyler plays devil's advocate by arguing that "for most people in the UK, railways are irrelevant, and the general assumption nationally is that everyone goes by car".

Honestly, I don't believe the market share claimed by the motorist lobby. To begin with, what about the millions of short trips on foot? There has to be an alternative to private driving for the many people who do not have access to a car.

What's more, few car journeys do not involve some other means of travel. On shopping trips, the car just takes you to a car park and you spend the rest of the day on foot. No doubt, the official statistics ignore the pedestrian part of the journey.

When I used to live in West Yorkshire, many would leave their cars at Hebden Bridge station, commuting on to Leeds by train. Elsewhere in *Railwatch* 96, you report that 91% of people who work in the City of London get there by rail.

Perhaps the answer is to move Parliament into the provinces and see what rail improvements we get as a result.

Tim Mickleburgh, 33 Littlefield Lane, Grimsby, Lincolnshire DN31 2AZ

## Mail re-think

While it is to be regretted that Royal Mail has decided to transfer a lot of mail from rail to road and air, we should look at the reasons behind this decision.

First of all, Royal Mail was unable to negotiate what it regarded as a fair price with English, Welsh and Scottish Railway.

Second, by using new "hubs", Royal mail expects to save about £90 million a year and actually reduce its road mileage by 26% (20 million miles) per annum.

The number of lorry movements per day will go down from over 8,500 to 2,500.

Also a return to rail for some aspects of distribution have not been ruled out for the future. So it's not all doom and gloom.

Roger Smith (Royal Mail employee), 67 The Street, Little Waltham, Chelmsford, Essex CM3 3NT