



Midlands

By Peter Hughes

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Chiltern Line

The Cherwell Valley re-signalling between Banbury and Leamington Spa is progressing well. A series of weekend blockades were planned from February with final commissioning over the spring bank holiday. This work will allow minimum headways on this busy route to be reduced from seven minutes to three minutes and provide paths for Chiltern Trains' half-hourly service to London as well as the freight and Cross Country services that share the route. It was announced in December that Chiltern Trains hopes to be taking over Hatton, Lapworth, Warwick and Leamington Spa stations from April 2004, leaving Central Trains to manage just the stations on this line within the West Midlands Passenger Transport Executive area. Further north, the re-connection of Moor Street terminus is awaiting re-signalling at Saltley which, with a new crossover at Bordesley, will also allow full use of the four track formation to Tyseley.

Midland Metro

Centro has produced four very impressive brochures detailing the proposed future expansion of the network. This is in addition to the two routes now going through the Transport and Works Act process. Midlands branch has written in support, suggesting priority for two routes: The city centre extension of Line One should be extended east to a new rail interchange at Duddeston; and south-west via the busy Queen Elizabeth Hospital area to a park and ride terminus at Frankley Services on the M5. We also think that the Black Country "Five Ws" route is a priority. This would link Wolverhpton, Wednesfield, Willenhall, Walsall and Wednesbury using, in part, the track beds of two former local lines which have no prospect of any other rail use.

Local services

The regional geography has in the past constrained the development of local rail services, as most radial routes start in one of the shire counties before running into West Midlands PTE territory. On some routes – such as those to Tamworth and Nuneaton – there is not a single station in the WMPTE area; and these routes are relatively undeveloped. Elsewhere, Centro's policy of fully staffed stations with free car parks has seen ridership rise steadily. A welcome development is the plan to build a new transport interchange at

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RAIL BICENTENARY

A year of events in Merthyr Tydfil to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of rail travel

A series of events is planned this year in the Welsh town of Merthyr Tydfil to celebrate Cornish engineer Richard Trevithick's contribution to railways.

Penydarren, the world's first high-pressure steam locomotive, hauled 10 tons of coal and 70 passengers from Merthyr Tydfil to Abercynon in 1804.

Unfortunately it did not make it back to Merthyr and railway development had to wait until later engineers devised less brittle rails.

Events began in February and continue until November.

A replica of Penydarren will be on display in the town from June until 31 October when it will go to the National Railway Museum in York.

In July or soon after, the 10-mile long Trevithick tramroad from Penydarren to Abercynon will reopen as a walking and cycling route – with a few deviations.

On the southern part of the route some of the original stone sleepers survive along with the brass retaining bolts.

The new route will parallel the Taff Trail which it will join near Abercynon.

The Steam Car Club of Great Britain will visit the town with their cars on 3 July when there will be steam specials between Cardiff and Merthyr Tydfil and from Cardiff to Cwmbargoed.

There are also exhibitions, plays, fairs, musical events and lectures.

For more information, ring 01685 379884 or email: Merthyr_tic@hotmail.com

Coleshill at a capital cost of £7.8million. This project, on the site of the original station which closed in 1965, comprises a new station with two 125-metre platforms, a five-bay bus station and 200-space car park. The site was identified in the multi-modal studies and will be the first of a ring of proposed park and ride

developments around the region. The plans for the autumn timetable change involve re-routing all Stourbridge local services, some of which currently run into New Street, into Snow Hill. This will free up some paths into the western approaches to New Street for the enhanced Virgin

West Coast services. It is also hoped that the Stourbridge line will go over to a six trains per hour frequency in the autumn. Just over 10 years ago Midlands branch successfully campaigned to reopen the Chase Line from Walsall to Cannock, Hednesford and Rugeley. Since then passenger growth has been steady and the present hourly service on this route is now recognised as inadequate. A half hourly frequency is planned by Centro. Unfortunately, the route is also used by freight services to Rugeley power station and the life expired signalling along the line, and through the busy junctions at Pleck and Rycroft, makes pathing an even interval service difficult.

AGM

The branch AGM was held on 28 February with Robbie Burns, Network Rail regional director, as guest speaker.

North West

By Trevor Bishop

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Goodbye old friends

The final day of operation of the 47-year-old class 101s were scheduled for 24 December. The final train was the 21.10 Rose Hill to Manchester Piccadilly, with the last service from Piccadilly being the 20.28. The first generation class of diesel multiple units, which have been in use on various lines in the North West for all their working life, have had to be withdrawn because their halon fire extinguishers are no longer permitted under safety legislation. A final farewell charter ran, which gave passengers eight hours of travel on the class, running on some lines in the North West where they used to ply their trade. The charter ran on Sunday 21 December, starting from Manchester Piccadilly to Buxton, then back via Piccadilly to Preston then Morecambe, Heysham, Morecambe again, back via Bare Lane and Carnforth to Barrow in Furness, then back via Preston to Piccadilly. Withdrawal may mean return of loco haulage on the Manchester to Blackpool route. First North Western is looking at the re-introduction of loco-haulage on the Manchester to Blackpool North route as a result of the shortages caused by the enforced withdrawal of class 101s. It's thought they could be used on peak hour services, top and tailed with class 31s to ensure easy and quick turn round at terminal stations, and the suggestion at the moment seems to be a Blackpool North to Greenbank via Piccadilly service in the morning with a return from Chester to Blackpool North via Piccadilly



in the late afternoon-evening. No contracts have yet been signed at the time of going to press, but it is believed this will happen shortly, with locos provided by Fragonset and Mk 2 air-conditioned stock.

SELRAP campaign

The benefits of reopening the Skipton-Colne railway line, being championed by Skipton-East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership, are cited in a briefing note prepared by the Rail Passenger Committee for Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. The note, dated 13 January 2004, puts high priority on the Skipton-Colne reopening, and says its reinstatement would:

- 1) Greatly accelerate journeys from Keighley and Skipton-Manchester (for which there is proven demand). Passengers, are currently forced to travel via Leeds, or change stations in Bradford.
- 2) Provide the populous, but economically deprived, area of East Lancashire with improved access to the major conurbations of West Yorkshire, ending Colne's perilous existence as a terminus at the end of a long branch line.
- 3) Link Keighley and Skipton and the surrounding area with the West Coast Main Line at Preston (with connections to a wide range of major centres, including Liverpool and destinations in Cheshire, North Wales and beyond via Crewe).
- 4) Provide through train services from Keighley and Skipton to Blackpool.
- 5) Relieve congestion on the A59 (Preston-Skipton).

There is probably also a potentially useful role for the route as a freight line. The proposal to reinstate the Skipton-Colne line enjoys active local authority support.

SELRAP chairman Steve Broadbent commented: "This further strong support for the reopening of the Skipton-Colne line is indeed welcome, especially at this crucial time for our campaign, but to have our aims brought to the attention of the Deputy Prime Minister as one of the north's leading priorities for rail investment is a major bonus and SELRAP is very grateful to the RPC for its continuing backing."

Paths for half-hour Manchester-Euston service could mean cuts for locals

The Strategic Rail Authority is proposing the following changes to First North Western local services from September 2004. The changes are intended to create paths for a half-hourly Manchester-Euston service and

to cater for the changes planned by First Keolis to Trans-Pennine services:

■ Liverpool-Manchester Airport service to be diverted to run via Earlestown.

■ A new Piccadilly-Manchester Airport-Crewe service to be introduced.

■ One of the two Piccadilly-Hazel Grove locals each hour to be withdrawn.

■ Southport-Manchester Airport service to terminate at Piccadilly.

Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive is opposing the changes on the grounds of the loss of a through service from Wigan to the airport, a reduction in the number of through services from Bolton to the airport (from three to two per hour) and a reduction in the frequency of services at Levenshulme and Heaton Chapel (from four to three per hour).

It's not clear at the moment whether the introduction of the Manchester Piccadilly-Manchester Airport-Crewe service will replace the current (when no engineering works!) Deansgate-Crewe service via Stockport. That would be the obvious way to reduce the number of paths used to enable the more frequent Euston service, but that would presumably leave Cheadle Hulme and especially Handforth with a reduced service, just the hourly Piccadilly-Alderley Edge (Cheadle Hulme would also have Macclesfield to Stoke-on-Trent locals).

Future meetings

The next few meetings of the North West branch will be on 17 April in Heywood (venue tbc, pencilled for the Navigation pub) at 11.00, 12 June in Kendal at the Cock and Dolphin Hotel (halfway between Kendal and Oxenholme), also 11.00. Members are welcome at all meetings and if attending the Kendal meeting, it's advised to book trains to Oxenholme and take the 41 or 41A bus to Kirkland.

Yorkshire

By Peter Davies

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Annual General Meeting and luncheon

The AGM and luncheon of the Yorkshire branch of Railfuture will be held on Saturday 20th March at the Huddersfield Hotel, 41 Kirkgate, Huddersfield at 11.00. The Guest Speaker will be Ian Yeoward of the Grand Central Railway and he will be speaking about the Grand Central Railway proposals to operate

high speed trains between Newcastle and Preston via Leeds, Wakefield (Kirkgate), Brighouse, Rochdale, Manchester (Victoria) and Bolton.

Rail access to Finningley Airport, Doncaster

It was resolved at the branch meeting held in Doncaster on Saturday 17 January that the branch would campaign for a rail access to the new airport.

Bradford

The newly formed Bradford Rail Users Group is actively campaigning for the protection of the corridor between Bradford (Interchange) and Bradford Forster Square. A public meeting was held in Bradford in December, and the proposals to link the two stations have support within the business community.

Shipley

The West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive started work on 2 January to carry out much needed improvements to the shelters and waiting accommodation at Shipley. The work is to cost £383,000 and CCTV cameras are to be installed. More waiting shelters will be provided by spring 2004.

Trans-Pennine Express

The new franchise to be operated by First Group Keolis commenced on 1 February. An announcement was made in December 2003 that £10million is to be spent on improvements to the rail stations at Scarborough and Northallerton. No details of the proposals have been received by the Yorkshire branch of Railfuture.

East Midlands

By Anthony Kay

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Corby developments

£1.5million of Government funding has been secured to set up the Station Business Park in Corby. But Corby hasn't got a station! However, the business park, which will create 1,000 new jobs on 3.2 hectares of reclaimed land, is intended to be integrated with a new transport interchange (trains, buses and taxis), so this may just be the impetus that is needed to finally give Corby the rail connection it needs.

Thames

By Chris Wright

Expansion fears

We have been making clear that if there is to be Government

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Local action



support for major population expansion in the area, Milton Keynes, Aylesbury and Bicester need rail links.

The issue was raised in the Commons in November (and again in January) by Dr Starkey, MP for Milton Keynes South West, and met the response that this will be considered.

The plans fly in the face of the Strategic Rail Authority views which admitted that it is fully aware of the expansion plans and infrastructure enhancements proposed but has "concerns over the funding for these projects, especially given the current state of railway finances" and the case was not made.

Councils have funded a further £50,000 study in 2003 for the SRA for hourly Oxford to Bedford and Milton Keynes to Aylesbury services. A bid for £1.5million to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has been made for detailed planning. £65million would secure re-opening within 30 months.

Meanwhile, trackwork continues to be stolen from Swanbourne at £15 a sleeper.

We are enraged that the Government has ordered work to be stopped on planning for rebuilding the railway east of Bedford yet announced plans to invest in the area and to expand Stansted Airport. This confirms that the Government is failing to deliver on rail links for the

future. Road schemes are proudly announced for East-West Links.

The SRA has failed to re-instate the Oxford-Bristol service in the new First Great Western franchise announced in late 2003. Milton Keynes could have had a direct service to Bristol. This is a missed opportunity.

Likewise the SRA has no plans to re-instate the MK to Gatwick and Brighton service and claims poor use which blatantly was not true to users!

Further reports show the Government and SRA are not resolving escalating rail costs. Bedford-Bletchley upgrade costs have rocketed to £45million (from £30million) and will be over two years late.

Bletchley Flyover has yet to see a train in spite of a £5million upgrade over two years ago.

Meanwhile, we are meant to take consolation from the main line upgrade which has seen major disruption and cost escalation from £2.5billion to £10billion and cuts to resignalling plans in the Bletchley area recently announced and new point work and track laid and then replaced during 2003 at Ledburn (near Leighton Buzzard).

We have welcomed the formation of the London and Western Railway Company by Chiltern Railways and Great North Eastern Railway and Adrian Shooter is due to speak at the

AGM on 28 February in Bicester. We consider these companies have the right ideas for a successful railway.

South Wales De Cymru

By Julian Langston

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and Peter Clark

New franchise commences

In early December, Arriva Trains Wales took over operation of the Wales & Borders franchise. The immediate effects were the issuing of new uniform clothing to all staff, and the removal of previous branding from the trains themselves, including the long-established Valley Lines name. The latter in particular was greeted with disappointment by many. At least one class 158 unit was in full Arriva colours within a couple of days of the takeover. Although the company has styled itself Arriva Trains Wales, the trains themselves will bear just the name Arriva as part of their livery.

The branch has had informal contact with ATW, whose forward plans include several developments which we will welcome. These include clock-face regular interval services on four routes passing through Shrewsbury where they will inter-connect, making possible a wide range of journeys either by through services or by a single change of train. How this works out in practice will depend much on the robustness of the timetable and reliability of connections. One of the aforementioned regular services will run hourly from Manchester to Carmarthen via Cardiff, and this will offer the much-needed (and long campaigned for) half-hourly fast service between Cardiff and Swansea (i.e. with the First Great Western London trains providing the other service each hour). But there will be some losers as well and, although details are awaited, it does seem that west Wales passengers will suffer a further reduction in through services to and from that area. Further bad news is ATW's contention that the Pacers, which operate most Valley Lines services and some others, are fit for purpose for another 15 years. There is no provision for any additional rolling stock in the franchise terms specified by the SRA, and no indication of how growth (such as that envisaged by the South East Wales Transport Board for Valley Lines and other routes in their area) is to be accommodated. ATW's policy on fares was unclear at the time of writing.

But ATW got off to a good start

by running an evening peak hour relief train from Cardiff to Bridgend, from early December when they took over, right up to Christmas.

Competition for First Group and Virgin

The branch was represented at a presentation in Cardiff by the London and Western Railway Company – a partnership between Chiltern Trains and GNER, set up specifically to bid for the Greater Western franchise which is due to commence in 2006. No specific service proposals were mentioned, but there was opportunity for informal discussion as well as questions on the presentation. Amongst other topics, we added our voice to those calling for high-quality replacements for the HST fleet when the time comes, and not Adelante or Voyager clones.

Central Trains fares fiasco

One of the SRA's timetable "tidying-up" exercises has resulted in Central Trains taking over the entire Cardiff-Birmingham-Nottingham service, which previously it operated jointly with Wales & Borders. A good feature is the regular interval fast service between those points. Less good aspects are poor connections for those travelling west of Cardiff and inferior services at Chepstow and Caldicot, as the W&B trains serving those stations now operate (and not to a clock-face pattern) only to/from Gloucester, where connections are often poor. Even worse is the fare structure. Central Trains was granted control of fares on the Cardiff-Birmingham corridor so, as per their policy, all Supersavers and longer-distance day returns were abolished, and savers declared invalid before 09.00. This action, designed to control overcrowding in the West Midlands, resulted in immediate fare rises of 40 to 85% for some journeys. But W&B still set the fares for journeys starting from Bridgend westwards, so it is often cheaper for Cardiff passengers to book tickets from stations further west! Central Trains does offer Central Value book-ahead tickets at lower rates, but for these relatively short journeys the usefulness of this type of facility must be questionable. It will hardly encourage car drivers, who have unlimited flexibility over travel times, to forsake their vehicles! We wrote to CT expressing our concerns, but it has not replied up to the time of writing.

No New Year cheer again

Although Valley Lines ceased to exist as an entity when Arriva took over, there were, as usual,



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no trains on New Year's Day (uniquely, outside Scotland) on what until recently purported to be Valley Lines! Perhaps we couldn't expect anything different this year, but we certainly hope that this absurd anomaly will be removed for 2005 onwards.

Where there's a will there's a way...

When, as hoped, train services on the Ebbw Vale line restart in 2005, initially the trains will probably run direct to Cardiff, not calling at Newport. Network Rail says that under existing signalling arrangements, Newport station has insufficient capacity to handle the new service. How strange then that for a whole week in December, Virgin Cross Country trains were booked to run via Newport, reversing in the station and taking up platform capacity during very generous turn-round times! And this without apparently having significant adverse effects on other services! We have always maintained that the layout at Newport is very flexible, more so than that at Cardiff Central in fact.

North East

By Peter Wood

Meetings

The branch annual meeting was held in Newcastle on 13 January when the speaker was Malcolm Chainey of the Tyne Valley Rail Users group. The theme was Community Rail Partnerships: The Way Forward.

Tyne-Tees direct services

With the support of regional politicians and the Rail Passengers Committee we continue to seek to persuade the Strategic Rail Authority not to axe the direct services between Saltburn and Newcastle from the start of the summer timetable. We are hoping to put the East Coast main line route utilisation strategy consultation with the SRA to good use in this respect

Durham coast line

With progress blocked as far as the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne, Leamside and Stillington branch campaigns are concerned, we are turning our attention again to services on the Durham coast line.

For some time, with our support, the local rail user group Coastliners has been seeking better services.

With the axing of the direct Saltburn-Newcastle services the route via Stockton, Hartlepool and Sunderland will revert to being the main direct link between Tees and Tyne with



Artistic pupils have come to the aid of their local station, with encouragement from the local rail user group, the official watchdog, their school and the High Sheriff of Cheshire..

About 40 children aged from 11 to 16 have been involved in the project, making mosaic panels spelling out FRODSHAM STATION which will be erected on the platforms as station nameplates. Some of the work has been accepted as GCSE project work.

Two years ago, pupils from the same school, Frodsham College of Science and Technology, provided paintings on aluminium plates for the station which had been previously badly hit by vandalism.

Despite predictions that the paintings would also be vandalised, they are still there and the chairman of the North Cheshire Rail Users Group John Hobbs believes the art work has helped young people in the area to "have ownership" of their station.

Janet Briggs of the local Rail Passengers Committee has taken a personal interest in the latest artistic enterprise which has been funded by Cheshire Crimebeat, a charity designed to help young people.

Teacher Linsey Parnell said the High Sheriff, Mrs R McConnell, visited the school and there has been positive coverage in local newspapers and in the school's own magazine.

She paid tribute to the rail user group for making the necessary applications for funds and remaining committed to the project over a long time scale.

scheduled journey times up to 85 minutes for the 47 miles.

It could be used for more through services. Sunderland is the north-east's biggest city and Hartlepool's rail links with the rest of the country are appalling. TransPennine, Grand Central and Virgin CrossCountry please note.

There is more scope for it to be used as a diversionary route when the East Coast main line is unavailable.

It needs later services (the last weekday services are 20.00 from Newcastle and 20.30 from Middlesbrough (18.30 and 19.33 respectively on Sundays). It needs faster services (some all stations trains manage the journey in 75 minutes).

There is scope for some new stations, especially in the Easington-Peterlee-Horden areas which would boost patronage and help the much-needed economic regeneration of east Durham.

Better marketing of services (is Arriva doing anything to promote the line?) is also needed.

This rail link is an under-used resource. The investment

required to revive it is modest in comparison to many other schemes. Unfortunately under the government's current proposals for regional government a north-east assembly would have no powers (or money) to help.

Morpeth and Hexham

On the plus side a Morpeth user group has started meeting (there have been some welcome if limited improvements in services in recent years) and a transport interchange has opened at Hexham with financial support from Northumberland County Council, the Railway Heritage Trust and the Northumberland Strategic Partnership.

East Anglia

By Nick Dibben

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Alconbury freight depot go-ahead

The Government has given the go-ahead to Alconbury Development Limited to build a major road-rail freight interchange at the former Alconbury airbase. The site is adjacent to the East Coast main line and the junctions of the A1 and A14

roads near Huntingdon. The original planning application was rejected by Huntingdon District Council, because of concerns about the site being used for air freight. An ADL appeal has now been accepted by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, with around 50 conditions including explicit refusal to allow commercial flying. The scheme involves nearly 700,000 sq metres of warehousing and 90% of this must have a rail siding facility. One of the planning conditions is that the rail connection must be in place before any of the warehousing can open. The planning consent also insists that any old building materials should be removed from the site by rail. The East Anglian branch has contacted ADL asking for more details of the proposals.

Government gives £65million for guided bus

The Government will give £65million out of the expected £85million to build the guided-busway between Cambridge and St Ives on the former railway route. The rest of the money will come from developers. Although the amount is far

Local action

more than Cambridgeshire County Council expected, the money has not convinced the local population that the scheme is practical. The busway will operate as "open access" with, according to the county council, five different bus operators each paying an access charge to use the busway. This open access means that there can be no guarantees on what services will be run or what will happen to existing bus services which could continue to use the local roads for free. Can you imagine the Strategic Rail Authority funding a rail scheme without knowing what level of service will be provided? Branch members have been invited to appear at a number of local meetings along the route to give their views on the scheme and point out the problems.

Details on Greater Anglia franchise announced

The SRA and National Express have provided some details about the new Greater Anglia franchise. National Express were announced as preferred bidders for the franchise in December and will take over on 1 April. The new operators will have to meet set standards for train performance including cleaning of trains, information and security. Around £31million station improvements are included within the seven-year franchise. Other improvements include refurbished stock for London commuter services, more coaches on Stansted Airport services and more through trains between London and the Suffolk branch lines to Lowestoft and Bury St Edmunds. InterCity stock on the London to Norwich route will be replaced by newer stock from the West Coast Main Line. National Express will not be getting any subsidy from the taxpayer, but will instead pay a premium of around £500million to the SRA over the seven years. Railfuture did a number of interviews with the local press on what improvements passengers would see over the next few years.

Scotland

By David Hansen

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Edinburgh airport rail link

Opinion is divided on the plan to drive two single-bore tunnels from the Edinburgh and Glasgow line under the airport terminal and a river, from where the line will rise with branches to Fife and Linlithgow. This £500million project would give access to the airport by trains from many parts of Scotland. If this was part of a whole series of improvements it would be one thing. However, it is almost the only major project being seriously proposed and some question whether this project should be given such a high priority. By a large margin Railfuture members at our meeting in December decided that it should not be given such a high priority and that alternatives should be advocated.

Edinburgh Park

This station opened in late 2003. It is of a very good standard and far better than the usual bus stop. However, this is spoiled by an almost complete lack of facilities. There is a "station building" that could form the home for such facilities. Trains to Glasgow do not stop there either, something that would be possible with electric trains of course. There is agitation to put such a stop into the new franchise.

Strategic speaker

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall annual general meeting. 13.00. Saturday 27 March 2004. Unitarian Church Hall, Notte Street, Plymouth. Main speaker: Chris Austin, Strategic Rail Authority

Railfuture radar

In an edition of Government Technology issued nine years ago, Wayne Hanson noted that brave fighter pilots did not win the Battle of Britain alone. It was "coordination and planning that ultimately won the battle".

While the German aggressors used radar in a limited sense, to guard individual airfields, the British "understood the strategic importance of this new technology".

Fifty-three radar towers were built, to look out across the seas. Radar sites and trained spotters were connected by telephone to a series of command centres where icons were carefully pushed over scale maps of England.

The pace and scale of each onslaught was mapped with remarkable precision and allied assets were mobilized as needed.

It is a theme that viewers were reminded of during the recent Channel 4 series about flying Spitfires. An historian suggested that the radar network on which they relied was effectively an intranet ahead of its time.

Newsgroups are becoming the intranet of this society and Railfuture, being a progressive bunch of widely distributed observers, is capitalising on the possibilities with enthusiasm.

We may not be large in comparison with some other consumer groups but our Branch structure is not unlike the Sectors with which Fighter Command was managed 65 years ago. Our geographic spread is one of our strengths

and our active members are quick to spot the contradictions between what is said in Westminster, Cardiff or Edinburgh and what is actually happening on the branch lines of Britain.

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You don't have to assemble an electronic address book - you can route a plain text message through our equivalent of that famous Uxbridge bunker.

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The threats on the horizon range from bustitution to fare inflation, from ill-informed investments to poor carriage design.

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If the title of a particular message doesn't interest you, just ignore it! The archive of correspondence sits on a remote server - under a loose floorboard somewhere in occupied territory!

The rail review

The Government is currently carrying out a review into the running of the railways.

One of the key problems in the current set-up is the way billions of pounds of taxpayers' money has been filtered into a myriad of companies, with few clear benefits to either traveller or taxpayer.

The Government could end this money-go-round in favour of simpler grants for specific duties and projects.

One prospect is that the Strategic Rail Authority will be blamed for all the past failings of Railtrack and will lose power to Department for Transport officials.

Rail Regulator Tom Winsor has warned that it would be a mistake to return to a system of annual financial settlements, such as were imposed on British Rail and "which drove railway professionals to the point of distraction". He is calling for five- and ten-year planning with much more detailed planning of schemes.

He said: "It is the role of government to make decisions about what kind of transport we want for the benefit of the community - and that includes

the wider community which benefits from transport links.

"It is the role of business to deliver transport services within that overall policy.

"Business will do this provided it can have the confidence and certainty necessary to come in and provide transport services at a fair and affordable price."

Railfuture is pleased to see the impressive Channel Tunnel rail link taking shape but the current system has failed to deliver a whole raft of other essential though smaller projects.

We have told government ministers on several occasions that the East-West rail link is a litmus test for any system.

It is a vital link which is relatively cheap and simple to provide. The current system has however been unable to deliver.

Many similar rail projects are also waiting for some clear thinking - and some real action. The majority of people - around 80% to judge by many recent surveys - want more traffic switched from road to rail.