

Value of experience

From time to time, I am encouraged by the way the railway is now being operated.

While it is easy to laugh at some of the initiatives, they will in total bring performance up.

Even the West Coast, it is being proudly stated, will have a Glasgow to London time of four hours 40 minutes.

We operated that time for years with class 87 locomotives and mk 3 stock, back in the 1980s, but no matter.

Putting back a unified control at Waterloo will bring benefits, as will bringing back the use of the whistle. The new managing director of Great Western Link, with her emphasis on getting the trains away on time, will bring improvements especially as Thames Trains and Great Western are now one unit.

While I still believe running short trains over long-distance cross-country routes is silly and will not attract the people on offer, there is no doubt the half-hourly interval service from Reading to Birmingham has removed the temptation always to go to Birmingham via London.

There are still problems which I hope will be tackled soon. Train regulation based on speed and stopping pattern is an essential requirement.

The next most important issue is to try to teach the young people on the railway some overall railway knowledge. A basic knowledge of railway geography would help.

I was not reassured as to the competence of a train manager who announced: "The next stop will be Sandwell and Dudley" just as the train had turned left at Wolverhampton and was heading for Birmingham via Bescot!

Turning away from the internal problems we must not forget the fight to defend the network from half-baked schemes.

It is easy for politicians of both major parties to praise light rail, trams and even busways. They appear not to care what effect this has on heavy rail's ability to function as a network.

They have built tramways where they are not required, often over old rail infrastructure, through industrial areas and away from centres of population. It is no wonder they have a poor reputation for return on investment.

We have a case in point in the West Midlands but I am loathe to comment as there is a Transport and Works Act inquiry in progress. We await the report before protesting.

It is sad but not surprising to see the National Audit Office saying of light rail: "Passenger num-

bers and hence revenues have been well below those forecast. Passenger numbers have fallen well short of expectations, for example, by 38 per cent on the Midland Metro and 45 per cent on the Sheffield Supertram."

The report points out differences between systems in England and those in France and Germany, where there are more systems carrying more passengers.

Systems in France and Germany connect major places of activity, such as hospitals and universities.

The comments about systems in France and Germany are particularly interesting, but the NAO seems to have avoided treading on political toes and failed to point out that bus deregulation – introduced by Nicholas Ridley and his transport minister David Mitchell, in Margaret Thatcher's mid-80s government – did much to undermine the viability of the fledgling LRT systems.

The Sheffield scheme, in particular, was based very much on the sort of systems in Germany and France which are now praised by the NAO.

But instead of seeing integration with local bus feeder services and park-and-ride facilities, and as part of a city-wide fare system, the Sheffield trams found themselves competing with bus services offering fares that deliberately undercut the tram with tickets that were not inter-operable.

The great irony is that while Sheffield council tax payers continue to face many years of paying off the debt incurred by all this nonsense, operation of the trams has been passed over to one of the main private-sector bus competitors, Stagecoach. This is hardly integration!

Unless and until bus, light rail, heavy rail and indeed all transport has a properly coordinated Department for Transport which requires promoters to integrate their schemes with other modes of transport, we shall continue to lag behind the rest of Europe.

I will end as I began on a cheerful note because it looks as if the Health and Safety Executive will lose its railway role.

At last people in authority are waking up to the fact that running railways is not like operating a nuclear power station or supervising an oil rig. It is more like being a master mariner and requires the same sorts of skills.

All we have to do now is persuade the engineers who are in charge of the railway that they need railway men and women to operate services. They should remember that it is possible to

run trains and maintain infrastructure at the same time.

I suppose we must give them a chance, although I was not impressed by Richard Fenny, designate director maintenance, writing in Network Rail's house magazine.

Based on his vast experience (he joined Railtrack in 2001) he says, "I have never believed that running Britain's railway is a complex business." Well you wouldn't think so, would you, from the results we presently enjoy?

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



Rayner's Review

LOOK BACK

By Trevor Jones htjones@raildev.fsnet.co.uk

Railway Development News No 2 was published 25 years ago in January 1979.

It was seven sheets of photocopied or duplicated A4 sheets, printed on both sides and making 14 pages, stapled together in top-left corner.

The price was 25 pence (free to members) and the front page headline read: *Bus-rail replacement – Will it become inevitable?*

The article said: "Much space has been devoted to the merits, or otherwise of proposals by BR to axe a further 2,500 route miles from the rail network if the government can guarantee adequate bus services that will slot into its inter-city network.

In March 1977 the Central Transport Consultative Committee came out with a critical report against such proposals, quoting past experiences during the Beeching era when many "assured" replacements didn't actually last very long.

"Despite a government assurance when launching the transport White Paper in June 1977 that there would be 'No return to Beeching' the document put forward ... a method of closing railways."

So a predecessor of Railfuture in September 1977 issued a revised version of *Can Bus Replace Train?* which "has since sold over 6,000 copies".

"BR may be forced to cut back some rural services because it does not have the equipment to run them.

"More than half the passenger network is dependent on rolling stock built 20 years ago and rapidly coming to the end of its economic working

life. "The diesel multiple unit refurbishment programme is at the most a holding operation and can only extend the life of the ageing fleet by a few years.

"To prevent these closures 'by default' the Government would, in the view of the CTCCTC have to allow BR an additional £25-£30million a year for new stock or the cross-country services would simply disappear.

"Our chairman, Mr Banks, in April 1978 said: 'What concerns some of us very greatly is the evidence that the ghost of Beeching still lurks in the corridors of 222 Marylebone Road.

"Certain statements by senior officials of BR and indeed the board's own submission to the Select Committee included the idea of further substitutions of railway services by buses."

Later on, a Dutch MP's assistant describes *Can Bus Replace Train?* as an outstanding report, adding: "We were faced here in Holland with similar problems.

"The report really was a help and was quoted in the Dutch Parliament in our efforts to keep several railway lines open to the public."

There was also an article by Trevor Garrod entitled *Motorways v Democracy* reviewing John Tyme's book of that title about objectors to planned new trunk roads.

There were seven pages of branch reports in this issue of *Railway Development News* which was edited by John Barfield with help from sub-editor Alan Bevan.