

# Light touch needed for rail

By Martin Smith

I am disappointed there is not a greater meeting of minds between supporters of light and heavy rail.

After all, there is no hard-and-fast rule dividing light and heavy rail, particularly in Germany, and we all want to promote rail transport.

I have been a member of Railfuture and previously of the Railway Development Association and of the Light Rail Transit Association (formerly the Light Railway Transport League) for almost 50 years.

In *Railwatch* 99, John Boynton writes about the Midland Metro line from Wednesbury to Brierly Hill as an "improvement with a bitter taste".

The success of the Manchester Metrolink lines to Bury and Altrincham and the Croydon Tramlink line between Wimbledon and West Croydon shows that a frequent light rail service has the potential to attract many times more passengers than a half-hourly heavy rail local service.

John Boynton argues that the formation of the trackbed between Wednesbury and Brierly Hill is not wide enough for a double-track railway and a double-track Metro.

True, but a single-track line should be sufficient for rail freight traffic, while a 10-minute interval tram service can be operated efficiently on a single track with passing loops. The single-track Lausanne-Renens line in Switzerland operates a 10-minute interval service, and every five minutes in the peak. In Britain, the Croydon Tramlink operates at 10-minute intervals on the single track between Birkbeck and Beckenham Junction, and the Nottingham Express Transit is single-track between Bulwell and Hucknall with three passing loops.

If the Wednesbury-Brierly Hill line is connected with the "Five Ws" line which, I am pleased to see, the Midlands Branch supports (*Railwatch* 99), then light rail could connect with a through regional service from Wolverhampton to Walsall, Lichfield and Derby, providing the regional link which John Boynton wants. In the other direction, light rail should be extended from Brier-



The Government may be tempted not to put more money into light rail because of "high costs and under-use" identified by the National Audit Office. This would be a big mistake, particularly when it has recently approved expensive large-scale road building which is a dead-end, dangerous and highly polluting policy.

Transport ministers should justify their decisions to the growing numbers of children who are suffering from asthma as a direct result of increasing pollution from road transport.

In America, where transport is dominated by the car and the aeroplane, rates of asthma among pre-school children have risen by 160% over the past 24 years, according to the Harvard Medical School

Manchester politicians who want to expand their highly successful metrolink tram system went to the Tory Party conference in Bournemouth in early October to lobby for their tram extension.

Even many Labour MPs accept that Labour's transport "policy" has been the Government's biggest failure. Merseyside and Edinburgh are also in the throes of trying to develop light rail tram networks.

ly Hill to Stourbridge Junction. It is worth reminding ourselves of some of the advantages of light over heavy rail, in suitable situations:

1 Where a disused railway track has been obstructed by developments, or where the original stations are some distance from a town centre, light rail can be inserted into the

urban fabric with sections of street track.

2 With simple station structures, light rail can have stations at much closer intervals than heavy rail. The slower overall speed is compensated by the shorter distance to walk to the nearest station. The map of the proposed Dunstable-Luton

Airport light rail line, published in *Light Rail Review*, No. 2 (Feb. 1991) showed 15 intermediate stations between Watling Street at the west end and a business park on the east side of the airport. Laing Rail has submitted a proposal for a low-cost line between Luton and Dunstable.

3 Except in major cities such as London, it is more economical to operate a frequent service with light rail than heavy rail, and even in London light rail can fill the gaps in the heavy rail network.

4 The Germans have demonstrated the advantages of track-sharing between heavy and light rail, for example electric in Karlsruhe and Saarbrücken, diesel trains in Zwickau. In Britain, railway platforms are too high for trams, but otherwise I believe that the objections are legalistic rather than technical.

Official figures released in August showed that the number of passenger journeys on modern light rail systems in England increased by 4.9 per cent in the year to 31 March 2004, to 142.9 million.

Tyne and Wear Metro opened in the early 1980s and was extended to Sunderland in March 2002. Route length is 78 km.

Docklands Light Railway opened in 1987 and extended to Lewisham in 1999. Its total route length is 27 km. City Airport extension is under construction.

Manchester Metrolink opened in 1992 and was extended to Salford Quays and Eccles in 2000. Route length is 39 km.

Stagecoach Supertram (Sheffield) opened in 1994 and is 29km long.

Midland Metro opened in May 1999. It runs between Birmingham and Wolverhampton, a route length of 20 km.

Croydon Tramlink opened in May 2000 and is 28km on three lines.

Nottingham Express Transit opened in March 2004. Route length 14km.

Blackpool trams are classed as a heritage service. Patronage fell by 18% in 2003/04, in part owing to the closure of 5 km of track for refurbishment work in 2004.

## Europe opens up for Railfuture members

By Jim Walker

jimwalker@mistral.co.uk

It's time to start thinking about the Railfuture annual trip to the Continent again. By tradition this year's French speaking trip (to Avignon) should be followed by a German speaking trip in 2005.

The choice is now Switzerland or Berlin. Encouraged by the good turn-out this year we have put together a list of four potential trips and would like members to express their preferences by writing to Trevor Garrod, 15 Clapham Road, Lowestoft NR32 1RQ as soon as

possible. Not all of these trips will run. The purpose of this exercise is to decide which ones actually have enough support for detailed planning and pricing to start.

Replying to Trevor at this stage does not commit you to going on any trip at all. Two different Swiss trips are proposed, although only one will actually happen.

Trip 1 would be a week long (Monday to Sunday) in April or May and would leave London at mid-day, arriving in Basle by the evening. Basle would be the base for optional side trips to Berne, Zu-

rich, the Black Forest, Southern Alsace, etc. The advantage is five full days in Basle.

Trip 2 would also be a week long in April or May, leaving London at mid-day with an overnight stay in Lille/Paris/Brussels, arriving in the base city of Berne, Zurich or Interlaken the next day. Please state which city you prefer in your reply. There would be another overnight stay on the way back. The advantage is the more scenic area of the base city.

Two different Berlin trips are proposed. They could possibly both go

ahead if there was sufficient support.

Trip 3 would be a week long (Monday to Sunday) in September, leaving London at mid-day with an overnight stay in Cologne, arriving in Berlin the next day. There would be another overnight stay on the way back.

Trip 4 would be a long weekend (Friday morning to Monday night) in September, giving three nights away. Because of the early start this trip will probably only be of interest to members who can get to Waterloo early in the morning.