

French cycle of success

French regional trains are becoming increasingly cycle-friendly in contrast to train operators in Britain, some of which have provoked resentment with unnecessary new restrictions.

If the will is there, cycles can be accommodated on trains.

Worried that the introduction of new trains could be used as an excuse to restrict access, Railwatch editor Ray King last year contacted French authorities who insisted that the new trains would be cycle-friendly. Here is the proof:

The new AGC high-capacity regional trains built by Bombardier include areas where cycles can be carried.

By contrast Britain is losing its grip.

The recent Strategic Rail Authority's cycle strategy was a fudge which gave too much leeway to train operators.

South West Trains, which receives £170million in annual subsidy payments from the Strategic Rail Authority – up by £48million on the previous year – upset cyclists by introducing new restrictions.

SWT's parent group Stagecoach are expected to make about £100million profit this year.

But at least Wessex Trains has bowed to pressure and will allow bikes on peak-time trains after protests over a recent ban.

The company had barred passengers from taking bikes on its services during the morning and evening rush hours because "they took up too much space".

Now it says that a maximum of two bikes will be allowed per service. Recently, a group of cyclists protested at Bath Spa station by taking a variety of large items on Wessex services such as ironing boards and step ladders. The



French National Railways has recently awarded Bombardier a £248million contract to build 100 extra AGC high-capacity trains for its regional network. Bombardier is already building 280 of the trains – which have Gresley-style bogies between the coaches – at Crespin in northern France. The trains can run on either diesel fuel, electricity or a combination of the two. Right: Tip-up seats and bike hooks feature in the convertible space. The trains were on show in Lille in March at the international railway industry exhibition



group wanted to know why these items were allowed but bikes were banned. Wessex Trains says the policy has been rescinded because most of its trains now have an extra carriage.

Chris Urwin, from the Western Rail Passengers Committee, said: "Cycling and rail travel work well together and it's great that Wessex Trains have listened to their customers and come forward with this simpler policy."

In general however, not just on rail, the Government has failed either to

promote or fund cycling properly, says the National Cycling Strategy Board. It says the level of cycling in Britain is among the lowest in Europe with only 2% of journeys being made on two wheels.

Philip Darlton, the board's chairman, says an extra £70million is needed to meet government targets on reducing congestion and enhancing air quality.

Ministers say spending on cycling has risen from £29million to £39million since 2002. But Mr Darlton says he can see "no overall strategic

commitment" to cycling at ministerial level.

Only one in every 50 journeys made in the UK is currently made by bicycle, he said. Last June ministers abandoned the target of raising this figure to 6% by 2010.

But the CTC cyclists campaign group reports that Transport secretary Alistair Darling has agreed to "facilitate an active working group to deliver cycle-rail integration".

The CTC expects little progress however until the "dust settles from the Railways Bill".

Rights on – with the passenger federation

By Trevor Garrod

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International rail passengers' rights and obligations were high on the agenda of the European Passengers' Federation during the winter, with the Transport Committee of the European Parliament debating proposals from the European Commission.

Passengers' rights cover a wide spectrum, from compensation for delays to easy access to timetable and fares information and the facility to book a through international ticket.

There were moves by some MEPs to water down the Commission's proposals and the Community of European Railways (representing operators and infrastructure companies)

certainly favoured a more restricted charter of passenger rights, relying more on voluntary initiatives by individual train companies.

On the other hand, some MEPs wanted to increase passenger rights on domestic services – which in some countries are less robust than in Britain.

EPF wrote to all MEPs on the European Parliament's Transport Committee, sending them a detailed position paper compiled by its Administrative Council member Rian van der Borgt (Netherlands) with input from several other members, notably Jean-Paul Jacquot (France) who also attended a meeting of the Transport Committee and a reception for the new Transport Commissioner Jacques Barrot. EPF's aims in the

position paper can best be summed up as *Easy Rail, Quality Rail, Responsible Rail*.

At the time of writing, amendments to the passenger rights proposals are being debated by MEPs.

Meanwhile, EPF has also maintained dialogue with the Community of European Railways (representing operators and infrastructure companies) and EPF Secretary Josef Schneider (Germany) contributed a chapter to its second Progress Report on Implementation of the Charter on Rail Passenger Services before Christmas.

We see the CER document as a useful first step in the right direction but believe that Europe-wide legislation is also needed.

At the end of January, Jean-Paul

Jacquot participated in a Round Table, organised by the CER and European Commission, with representatives of the new EU states.

This was designed partly to discuss the changes taking place on national rail networks and the pitfalls to avoid.

By the time you read this article, EPF should have held its Annual General Meeting and Conference at Strasbourg and agreed its work plan for the coming twelve months.

You can read EPF's Annual Report for 2004 on its website www.epf-eu.be.

Or you can send a stamped addressed envelope to its chairman, Trevor Garrod, 15 Clapham Road South, Lowestoft NR32 1RQ.