

The long way round

Computers are wonderful things. They allow you to check your train times and buy your rail tickets on line.

But when they tell you to walk away from a railway station and take the bus for an alternative unreliable, uncomfortable – and longer in distance and time – journey, you begin to have doubts.

There has been much criticism of the new Government-backed Transport Direct website so Railwatch editor Ray King tried it out for a mythical journey from his home in East London to Railfuture chairman Mike Crowhurst's home in Leeds.

Sadly the website ignored the excellent train service from Ray's local station, Cambridge Heath, telling him instead to go by bus and Tube to Liverpool Street.

The train journey to Liverpool Street would have taken five minutes while the bus and Tube takes up to half an hour.

Some commentators have accused the site of being unfair to public transport and stressing the advantages of going by car.

Of course, the computer can't tell you about the hidden benefits of going by train – safety, comfort, free time for reading, study or eating.

Nor does it reveal the nastiness of travelling by road – the danger, pollution, anarchy and aggression.

Railfuture member Stuart George asked: "Has anyone had satisfactory results from this site?"

He then added: "I've found it useful for giving me information about the existence of local bus services in parts of the country with which I'm unfamiliar.

"As for rail services, it vastly over-estimates change times which means it fails to find perfectly acceptable connections and suggests a long wait will be required (or even an overnight stay). If people use it to decide between public transport and their car, they'll go by car every time."

Information technology however is crucial to the railway.

Live departure boards are now becoming commonplace and the technology is spreading to bus services. At Winchester station, for example, as you enter the booking hall you are confronted by an electronic display showing rail departures.

As you leave, you are faced outside with a similar board showing bus departures.

But Railfuture's passenger committee is concerned that Network Rail is routinely late notifying engineering works with the result that it is not possible to plan journeys (or even book tickets) more than about four weeks in advance.

Train companies, especially Virgin, are slow to put the information on



High-tech steam for a new age

By Alan Fozard

A groundbreaking project to build a modern steam engine for use on today's railway reached a critical stage in January after more than two years work when engineer David Wardale completed his fundamental design calculations for the 5AT advanced technology locomotive

The 5AT Project is a unique undertaking which aims to design and build a highly efficient steam locomotive for hauling excursion and cruise trains on the main line in the 21st century.

An important objective for the project is to demonstrate the significant advances in steam locomotive technology which have been made over the past 50 years through the work of the great French engineer André Chapelon and his Argentine disciple, Livio Dante Porta, who died in 2003.

Mr Wardale, who conceived the 5AT project, collaborated closely with Porta when developing steam locomotive

designs for use in South Africa and China.

The new locomotive is designated Class 5AT – in recognition of its format and size similarity to the ex British Railways Class 5. AT stands for advanced technology.

The 5AT would be the most powerful express steam locomotive design ever to run on the British rail network.

It would be the first main line locomotive built to optimise Chapelon-Porta technology to launch a "second generation" steam locomotive. It aims at levels of thermal efficiency twice that of most steam locomotives of the 1950s.

A major objective is to achieve extremely high levels of reliability and low maintenance costs. These are expected to be at least comparable to the best achieved by modern diesel locomotives.

The 5AT will produce a constant drawbar power in excess of 2500 hp at 71 mph and it is being designed for

a top speed of 125 mph. The locomotive will have a range of about 385 miles under normal operating conditions before needing additional water supplies. The prototype is expected to be oil fired but a coal fired version is practical.

Work is currently under way to quantify costs. A combined 5AT Feasibility Study/ Business Plan is being prepared for later this year. A loco could be produced within 10 years.

The project is now looking for support from individuals who have appropriate legal, commercial and financing experience and an interest in seeing the further development of the steam locomotive.

More information: www.5at.co.uk

David Wardale's book "The Red Devil and Other Tales from the Age of Steam" was published in 1998. ISBN 0-9529998-0-3. For details see www.5at.co.uk/Red-Devil-book.shtml

Illustration: Robin Barnes

their own website (and cannot then offer Apex reservations).

When Railfuture Wessex was planning at Christmas time the venue and date for its AGM in February or March, there was no information beyond the end of January – not a lot of use!

Another passenger committee concern has been timetables produced by one operator not showing services provided by another.

Railfuture branch activists might also like to consider checking their local tourist information leaflets.

Publishers sometimes need to be reminded that the leaflet should show correct information about rail

travel. The new Desiro 450 and 444 trains have automated next-stop announcements and scrolling displays, but these can give false info.

For example, every time Tony Smale gets back to Fareham from Winchester, the announcement is "change here for Havant and Chichester".

But at certain times of the day, regulars know it is better to stay on the train and change at Fratton.

I wonder if the system is sufficiently intelligent to cope with this level of detail? Daily, the mystery voice tells me that certain areas are designated as quiet areas. Well why don't the announcements stop then!

● Railfuture annual general meeting

● 7 May Peterborough

● Railfuture reopenings conference

● 2 July Barry, South Wales
Sponsored by Angel Trains

● Rail users conference
5 November
Manchester