

Railway wrecking



The railway wreckers are continuing work to impose their Cambridge-St Ives busway on an unwilling population. In this picture by former Railfuture chairman Steve Wilkinson, the track has been ripped up at Histon. This was once a double-track main line, with a mile-long goods loop and in the distance, sidings for the Chivers jam factory. Steve commented: "It's difficult to believe that such a fantastic asset as the railway should be thrown away. We campaigned for years for the railway to be reinstated and the public agreed with us. But by means of an unholy alliance of a Tory county council and a Labour government, the politicians insisted on a busway."

Ivory tower economics

Book review

A Review of The Railways, the Market and the Government by John Hibbs et al, IEA, 2006.

Professional economists are in deep trouble over railway privatisation. Economists, not politicians, were the first advocates for the fragmented form of railway privatisation as suggested by Daniel Overbey in *Railroads: the Free Enterprise Alternative* (1982).

They incited the wanton destruction of human capital by suggesting that existing experienced staff be bought out – evidently with the carriage depreciation funds – lest they sabotage the process.

This resulted in a "shortage" of rolling stock. Railway labour was assumed to be unskilled and hence overpaid, probably because training courses on entry are short.

However, the cumulative experience and training required by drivers, senior signalmen, supervisors and track engineers is the equal of any craft trade and hence in inelastic supply.

A professional economist should have grasped that if you replace a state manpower monopoly with a de facto union collective monopoly, costs are going to escalate. Costs will also jump as rival contractors tumble all over each other during engineering works.

Today two "think tanks" remain in the privatised railway business. One is the Centre for the Study of Regulated Industries at The University of Bath School of Management, whose publications can be found at <http://www.bath.ac.uk/cri/> and the other is the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA).

Professor Booth in the introduction asks the right question: why was the top down non-market solution of enforced track and train separa-

tion applied? Indeed he could have gone further.

Unfortunately, faced with economist failure, this narrative swiftly degenerates into a pot-pourri of prejudices and potty policy prescriptions.

Professor Hibbs considers that the prime reason for railway losses is . . . er . . . railway enthusiasts. Dr Wellings thinks that the road lobby is weak; whereas all it has done since the disappearance of the British Roads Federation is to go underground and make common cause with the sprawl-building lobby.

Wellings believes buses should run at 80 mph on motorways to compete with inter-city trains. The ideas of Paul Withrington on railway conversion are uncritically accepted. Merkert and Nash provide plenty of facts but unlike David Tyrrell, who has experience as a railway accountant, do not grasp the operating inefficiencies the "toll road model" generates.

Verdict: essential reading for railwaymen and campaigners to see what they are up against. It contains information not available elsewhere but cannot be seen as a reliable guide to railway economics. Rather, enthusiasts should spend time slogging through a good current university text such as Pindyk and Rubinfeld's *Microeconomics*, add knowledge of the real railway and think.

On coming to power Gordon Brown has appointed Ruth Kelly, an LSE-trained economist, as Minister of Transport. If she is to sort the economists out, she is going to have her hands full.

A Review of The Railways is available by mail order from IEA, 2 Lord North Street, Westminster, London, SW1P 3LB at £12.50 including postage.

LOCAL ACTION

East Anglia

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East-West

Rail campaigners were disappointed that the Government failed to include the East-West rail link in its 30-year plan published in the summer. So we must keep up the pressure. So please sign the petition at the Prime Minister's website <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/East-West-rail/>

Stansted

Trains from Birmingham to Stansted Airport will in future be run by Cross Country recently awarded to Arriva. The Arriva bid was led by Andy Cooper, former managing director of Anglia Railways.

Peterborough interchange

Railfuture East Anglia will be trying to ensure that National Express – which takes over the East Coast main line franchise in December – maintains the good service at Peterborough which is a key interchange for other services. The operator's website is www.youeastcoast.co.uk

Sunday trains

Stagecoach, with its newly awarded East Midlands franchise, has promised to run more trains from Liverpool to Norwich. We have already approached Stagecoach to resolve the problem of Sunday working which has led to regular cancellations of trains. The new managing director of East Midlands Trains is to be Tim Shoveller, former business development director of Virgin Trains.

Longer trains

The branch is pleased to see that Network Rail is studying how to improve capacity on the overcrowded main line between Ipswich and Liverpool Street. NR has concluded that double decker trains are not the answer. Extending existing platforms to accommodate 14 or 16 coach trains will cost £1billion but increase capacity by a third.

Race to improve

The branch is encouraging Suffolk County Council to co-operate with ONE to improve facilities on the pared-down Newmarket branch which has however seen a steady increase in the number of passengers, particularly those going to the racecourse. The meagre platform shelters need improving as does the signage at Newmarket station.

Faster trains plea

East Anglia branch believes there is a market for speeded-up services from Cambridge to London Liverpool Street. ONE's policy of giving precedence to Stansted Airport trains could be relaxed to allow schedules from Cambridge, Audley End and Whittlesford to be improved, at least during peak hours.

Four tracks

The branch has supported many of the aspirations in Network Rail's draft Greater Anglia rail utilisation strategy, including extra services on the Great Eastern main line, and an hourly service from Ipswich, Lowestoft and Peterborough. We also called for a four-track section between Chelmsford and Colchester, more double track on the King's Lynn line, faster journey speeds and more spare trains to cope with special events.

