

46-year wait for train to Ebbw Vale

A freight-only line in south Wales was transformed in February after an expenditure of £30million.

Bringing passenger trains back to Ebbw Vale for the first time for 46 years has been one of Railfuture's major campaign targets for years.

Blaenau Gwent council leader Hedley McCarthy described the passenger service from Cardiff as "the catalyst for the economic regeneration of the area".

He added: "It brings the jobs from the vibrant economy of Cardiff much closer to the people of Blaenau Gwent and at the same time it brings affordable housing nearer to young professionals who may not be able to afford Cardiff.

"I'm hoping it will mean an increase in our population.

"A rail link from Abertillery to Newport will be the next thing we will be pressing for."

The project has involved the upgrading of 18 miles of freight-only track to make it suitable for passenger trains.

Passengers for Newport will have to change to a bus at Rogerstone because a train service between Ebbw Vale and Newport has been postponed indefinitely.

Trains will call at Newbridge, Risca and Rogerstone. New stations at Llanhilleth and Crosskeys were unfinished when passenger trains returned but were expected to open in March.

As *The Guardian* pointed out in a leader column: "The valleys have a famous history – the political home of Keir Hardie, Nye Bevan and Michael Foot – but they have struggled to find a happy future after coal."

Ieuan Wyn Jones, the Welsh Assembly's Deputy First Minister and Minister for the Economy and Transport, travelled on the first passenger train from Ebbw Vale since 1962.

He said: "This is a powerful signal of our determination to ensure a prosperous future for the Valleys and all our communities.

"This new service underlines our commitment to a strong role for railways in a greener, 21st century Wales."

The project was funded by the Welsh Assembly Government.

The new stations include car parks and CCTV.

Western Mail journalist Rhodri Clark was on the first train and interviewed passengers.

Nicola Harris, 22, told him she caught the train to show her two-year-old son Harvey what it was like to ride a train.

"He's always liked trains. He loves Thomas the Tank Engine," said Ms Harris, from Cwm, near Ebbw Vale.

Maxine Burgess, 38, was surprised by the £5.10 cost of the return ticket



The second train to Cardiff from Ebbw Vale, photographed near Risca, on 6 February (the first one was in the dark). After Dr Beeching closed the passenger service, freight trains continued to run regularly to Ebbw Vale steel works until the late 1990s

Picture: evinrisca of flickr.com

to Cardiff from her home town, Ebbw Vale. "I'm very happy with that. For a good day out in Cardiff you could easily pay £10 for parking," she said. "I can have a glass of wine with my dinner today. If I was in the car I couldn't drink."

A retired steelworker said: "The last time I used this railway was when I was going to do my National Service in 1953."

Mark Langman of Network Rail said: "This is made possible with huge co-operation from all participating parties.

"Network Rail is proud to be part of the project and to have the opportunity to serve this community by overseeing the daily operation of the Ebbw Valley Railway, ensuring that it is safe, punctual and reliable for passengers."

Arriva Trains Wales commercial director Mike Bagshaw said: "This is an important component in the economic regeneration within Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly County Boroughs and will provide a sustainable form of transport for travel to and from these areas to Cardiff and beyond."

Now rail campaigners are hoping politicians and planners will look more positively at restoring Wales's coastal railway.

They want to see trains between Carmarthen and Aberystwyth and also between Portmadog and Bangor. They may be in adjoining counties, but the train journey between Carmarthen and Aberystwyth is a marathon that takes more than six hours.

And to travel by train from Barmouth to Bangor – 60 miles apart in the same county – you'll need five hours for the journey via England's Shrewsbury and Chester.

In Ireland work has now started on the rebuilding of its "western corridor" railway.

Towns near its western seaboard such as Limerick and Galway will be reconnected in a £50million, 52-mile scheme.

Campaigners say reopening another 46 miles would link Sligo to Westport, Galway and Limerick at a total £250million cost for the entire route.

There are already calls for Wales to examine this Irish solution and to consider restoring two missing railways, from Carmarthen to Aberystwyth and Porthmadog to Bangor.

Restoring the Bangor to Caernarfon railway could be an obvious starting point. Only a few miles of track are needed to link two major towns, and more of the old route is intact than further south.

Scotland

In Scotland, progress continues with more preparatory work on the Airdrie-Bathgate rail reopening scheme. Network Rail began a compulsory purchase programme in January.

It affects 1,100 plots of land in locations along the proposed route through North Lanarkshire, West Lothian and Edinburgh.

Construction work on the section of the new line between Bathgate and Airdrie will begin in the autumn. Survey work is already underway. The £300million project is funded by Transport Scotland.

England

In England though, obvious rail reopening prospects are repeatedly shunted into the sidings by politicians and planners with their blinkers firmly in place. Perhaps

the worst case of vandalism is the ripping-up of the Cambridge-St Ives line to make way for a guided busway.

Now it is predicted that the Government is about to give the go-ahead for similar wrecking tactics on the Luton-Dunstable line in favour of a guided busway.

Not content with that, it also wants to put a guided busway on the former Bath-Bristol railway which has since been converted into a Sustrans cycle way.

East-West

There are, however, hopes that soon there will be real progress on the East-West rail link.

The consortium of local authorities will be asked to fund a "level 4" study this year.

The "level 3" is believed to have found that the western section would be commercially viable with a cost-benefit ratio of two to one.

More investigations will be needed to establish the best way east of Bedford.

Rail minister Tom Harris met Bedford Labour MP Patrick Hall in December and told him: "We are always willing to consider proposals for the reopening of lines where there is a sound and sensible business case and funding can be identified."

Uckfield-Lewes

In Sussex there are also hopes that the Uckfield-Lewes line could be reopened. Network Rail is in the middle of a £130,000 survey, paid for by local councils, to establish the engineering costs of rebuilding the line. The Wealden Line Campaign believes that if all goes well, the line could reopen in four years time.