

By Trevor Bishop
trevor.bishop0@btinternet.com

■ ■ Tram-trains for Rawtenstall-Victoria?

At a recent meeting, Railfuture North West was considering the idea of commuter services being started on the East Lancashire Railway heritage line from Rawtenstall to Bury and Heywood, when it was suggested that something more ambitious could be better. The idea of testing the Department for Transport's tram-trains (which are presently expected to be tried out on the Sheffield to Huddersfield line) on the line was thought to be a far more viable test of the concept than that in south and west Yorkshire, as it would involve running on both "normal" heavy rail and tram tracks.

It was thought that there would be few infrastructure changes needed to make it all happen and it would provide a service that presently does not exist although it was suggested Metrolink and Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive would not be very supportive.

The branch is already in contact with local MP David Chaytor over the commuter train idea.

■ ■ Delay in lengthening Pendolinos costs £70million

The delay in awarding the contract for the lengthening of Pendolinos has cost an extra £70million above the deal that was offered jointly by Virgin, Angel Trains and Alstom in December 2006.

It is thought that now that the delivery of the extra carriages would span the end of the current franchise and the start of the next, the Department for Transport's requirement for a shadow franchise company to deliver the extra carriages has caused the delay.

■ ■ Northern fast Calder Valley services from December?

Northern Trains is proposing a fast Leeds-Manchester Victoria service following a timetable development study chaired by West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive. The enhanced service would start in December this year if the bid (which has gone to the Department for Transport) goes ahead.

■ ■ Merseyrail dual-voltage initiative

The recent study commissioned by Merseytravel into the electrification of the Bidston to Wrexham line is thought to have shown a poor business case and Merseytravel is considering alternatives. Barrier fencing to deter trespassers on the line and the presence of steel sleepers in some areas is thought to have inflated costs considerably, so the alternative of overhead electrification is now being considered. This could coincide with acquisition of dual-voltage stock which could operate across the current and a further expanded, electrified Merseyrail network.

The class 507/8 stock in use on the third-rail network is 35 years old and would be due for replacement in 2014. Additionally, the existing 25kV network has all the complicated bits electrified already, so the case for wiring alternative routes to Lime Street gets better. For instance, when the route via Runcorn is closed for engineering, Euston-Liverpool Pendolinos are often dragged behind diesels via Manchester Piccadilly/Oxford Road/Earlestown. With some short sections being electrified, diesel use could be reduced or eliminated. Further overhead electrification from Ormskirk-Preston and Kirkby-Wigan would mean through services could use dual-voltage stock and would increase reliability.

CO-OP RAILWAY: A campaign to end the "systematic weaknesses" of Network Rail which cause "unnecessary" chaos to travellers has been launched by a group of MPs. The 29 Co-operative Party MPs, who work with the Labour Party, want the public to have more of a say over the way the rail infrastructure firm is governed. They say if it were run as efficiently as the European average there would be cash for 1,000 new rail coaches yearly.

Give us an ICE time – not a Pendolino

By Michael Weinberg
michael.weinberg@btinternet.com

Standing on the platform at Freiburg station during a recent visit to south Germany, I was struck by many contrasts between rail travel there, and on Britain's railways.

First, the number of people waiting would have completely swamped anything that passes for an inter-city train here.

Second, many travellers had heavy luggage, including rucksacks, cases and bikes that made one wonder what would happen if a Pendolino arrived to carry us!

Fortunately it was a high-speed inter-city express made up of 14 coaches, nine second class, four firsts, and a restaurant car.

Compare with the Pendolino of nine coaches which also has four firsts, five seconds, one of them including the "shop".

Standard passengers are distinctly second-class people according to Virgin.

The ICE fortunately swallowed us all up, and the spaciousness, silence and smoothness of the train itself contrasted with the cramped, claustrophobic, noisy and bumpy ride of the Pendolino which is my usual vehicle for inter-city travel.

I know Virgin thinks its trains are the bees knees but I wonder if any of their executives have travelled on a TGV, ICE or Eurostar, to see what a modern high-speed train should be like.

Incidentally, the restaurant was open from Interlaken to Berlin, the complete route of the train, compared to Virgin's shop which in my experience closes on the way south at Milton Keynes, and often closes for stock taking or a crew change on a journey from Preston to London!

Every seat on an inter-city train in Germany is provided with what is called a "reiseplan" which lists the arrival and departure times of each stop on the service, together with which platform it will arrive at, all connections from that particular station and the platforms they leave from.

For good measure it also gives the distance between each station. The facilities on board are also highlighted in German and English.

I travelled around mainly on "Regio" trains which invariably were loco-hauled push-and-pull electric double deckers, which were again, spacious, quiet and smooth riding.

Also the different political attitude to railways abroad was evidenced by the fact that at busy times these trains, normally of three coaches, were augmented to four, five or six.

In the city of Basel, S-bahn (suburban) services have been equipped with new electric, four-car articu-



NORMAL SERVICE: A German

lated units. Once again even on these commuter trains there is a feeling of spaciousness with none of the wretched five-a-side seating we have to endure.

These would seem to be ideal for our big cities here, subject to electrification of course.

As an interesting aside, the route I used was mainly in Germany although it was a Swiss train.

In Britain the aim seems to be to cram as many seats as possible into a coach which is already small by world standards.

To experience the space inside a metre-gauge Swiss coach invites critical comparison with, say, a Voyager.

I now come to the vexed question of information both on the train and at stations.

On the train itself, British train operators seem to be obsessed with LED-type indicators.

In my experience these are usually too small, in the wrong place, and virtually unreadable in most light conditions.

How many passengers can actually read those on the Voyagers and Pendolinos for example? Or even know they are there!

Pendolino coaches have the destination and next stop indicated on the doors, but apart from the fact that the information is often wrong, in most cases they're not bright enough to read.

In Germany the indicators are large, well lit, and easy to read. On the Regio trains I used, there are no indicators built into the loco end of the push-pull units.

So what do they do? They stick a large board in the front window with the destination clearly written on it: simple, but effective.

As for the station indicators, to

deck push-pull train at Basel Bad

Pictures: Michael Weinberg



STUTT GART: An upgraded tram at Wilhelm-Geiger-Platz

quote a TV programme: "Don't get me started!"

Although things have improved in some areas we are still too often saddled with poor TV monitors that are too small, often don't work, give the wrong information and again in some light conditions just cannot be read.

We always seem to go for the complicated option. The abomination at Manchester Piccadilly is typical.

I haven't yet managed to fathom out how it works and it is an entertainment to watch baffled passengers trying to come to terms with it!

To give another example: Birmingham New Street has indicators on the platforms giving the destinations of the next few train departures.

Arriving from, say Shrewsbury and wanting to change on to a train for Milton Keynes, there is no way of finding my connection unless I happen to know I'm looking for a Euston service.

Even then I have to go to the appropriate platform to find if it

actually stops at Milton Keynes. I'm sure many *Railwatch* readers have found similar examples of a frustrating lack of accurate information, and generally we understand the rail system.

What it must be like for occasional users I dread to think.

We used to have posters on all large stations on all platforms giving the departure time, platform and station stops of all services, which would solve the problem. They've been abolished since privatisation.

They still have them in Germany, on stations large and small, and believe me they make changing trains a simple matter.

We have too many bosses running our railways who do not actually use the trains.

Incidentally getting back from Stuttgart was a doddle: TGV to Paris, Eurostar to Saint Pancras and Pendolino to Milton Keynes Central. Overall journey time was about eight hours.

Worst part of the journey? Trying to get two fairly small cases on to a packed Pendolino!

By Peter Cousins
peter-r.cousins@virgin.net

■ ■ New Street station

When Birmingham New Street station was rebuilt 40 years ago it was used by just 640 trains a day. Now there are 1,400 trains per day and 17 million passengers per annum and the station facilities are clearly no longer adequate.

The branch AGM in April received a presentation from Martin Chambers of Network Rail on the Birmingham "Gateway" project to rebuild New Street station. He said that the main phase of work at New Street will begin next year with first the 'b' and then the 'a' platform ends being sequentially taken out of use for four months each during reconstruction.

The project, which is scheduled to be completed in 2012, includes the installation of nine lifts and 31 new escalators with changes to all of the passenger circulation areas and office accommodation. When it is complete passengers will be able to walk freely across a large new station concourse – including the area now used as a multi-storey car park. An improved link to Moor Street station is also planned. Perhaps surprisingly no alterations to the track layout are planned during this work. There will be passive provision for an additional bay platform at the 'a' end but any track level changes will need to wait for the New Street resignalling which is scheduled to follow the station rebuilding.

■ ■ South Midlands rail utilisation study

In July several members of the branch attended an exhibition in Birmingham of the work in progress on the South Midlands and Chilterns RUS. First impressions are that Network Rail has been very thorough in documenting the capacity across the region and identifying the current constraints. We were particularly pleased to see all the existing freight loops listed, as the need to path inter-regional freight alongside the ever faster inter-city passenger services is rapidly becoming an issue. The reality is that capacity across much of the region is currently limited by the need to upgrade 1960s era signal boxes at Walsall, Wolverhampton, Saltley and New Street before changing the track layouts – a programme which runs through to 2015.

■ ■ Service enhancements

Negotiations between London Midland, Centro and the regional county councils have resulted in a number of enhancements to local commuter services being funded in the December timetable. Perhaps the most notable change is the upgrade planned for Chase line services. Passenger services on this line were re-introduced in April 1989 after a long campaign by local Railfuture members and it is gratifying to see that increased patronage now justifies funding a half-hourly service to Rugeley.

However there is also some bad news. The useful Walsall-Wolverhampton shuttle service has not been funded by the Department for Transport and is expected to revert to a single "Parliamentary train" in December. This hourly service carries an average of just 12 passengers with 25 in the peak hour and at lunchtime. The branch has protested at the cut, strongly supported by both local councils and MPs. But the issues are unusually complex. Local funding is limited, platform capacity at Wolverhampton is limited – notably by long layovers for the West Coast service – and following the enhancements to other commuter services, London Midland will not have any spare diesel multiple units in December. We hope that the service can be reintroduced at a later date when the planned new stations at Aldridge and Willenhall have been opened and the area has been resignalled.

Thameslink programme

On Thursday 6 November at 19.15 at Dom Polski next to Bedford Midland station on Ashburnham Road, First Capital Connect will be making a presentation to Bedford Commuters Association and anyone else who wishes to attend on the Thameslink Programme.