



Your letters

Buses and trains

The inclusion of Abingdon on the Association of Train Operators map of non-rail-served settlements with populations of over 25,000 (*Railwatch* 118) should not be taken to imply that restoration of the Abingdon branch line is desirable, even if it were possible.

When Abingdon was a small market town with 5,000 inhabitants, the railway station in the town centre was very convenient for most people.

However, now that Abingdon has more than 35,000 inhabitants, many living more than a mile from the town centre, it would not be convenient to come into the centre to catch a train.

On the other hand we enjoy excellent bus services, every 15 minutes to Radley station, every 20 minutes to Oxford station, and two to three buses an hour (by two different operators on different routes) to Didcot Parkway.

The problem is inadequate co-ordination between bus and rail services.

Radley, with four buses an hour to Abingdon and Kennington, has only one train an hour off-peak.

There is no real reason why Radley should not have a half-hourly train service, but Network Rail maintains that allowing an extra three minutes for an additional stop each hour would cause delays on the congested Oxford-Didcot line.

Cholsey, as the station for Wallingford, a much smaller town than Abingdon, enjoys a half-hourly service, and Radley ought to have just as good a service.

Rail passengers from Abingdon travelling north of Oxford or to London have a good bus service to Oxford station, even running every half-hour in the evenings and on Sundays.

However, passengers travelling to the West or South Wales have only one bus an hour to Didcot in the evenings and on Sundays, with the last bus back to Abingdon on Sundays at 19.25.

Although Railfuture is rightly campaigning for the restoration of closed rail services, it is not necessary to reopen every little branch line. Good feeder bus services play

an essential part in an integrated public transport system.

When I visited Nottingham last year, I was very impressed by the information in the Nottingham Express Transit timetable leaflet that Hucknall, a town about the same size as Abingdon, has a local bus service which runs at seven-minute intervals connecting the estates with the town centre, railway station and tram terminus.

Renaming Radley station as "Radley and Abingdon", and better bus/rail connections, would be the best way to put Abingdon back on the railway map.

Martin Smith, Bath Street, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 1EA

Third class fares

While I welcomed the extremely low cost of advance fares on a recent trip to South Wales, First Great Western deserve no accolade for the service provided to holders of these tickets.

The trains were not busy (hence the cheap fares), however the coaches containing my seats were heavily reserved as opposed to other standard class coaches. Preferences for forward facing seats were ignored.

Furthermore the return journey from Newport to Paddington was on a Saturday, and I hoped to upgrade to weekend first.

The train was 20% full and looked empty in first class, but the conductor announced on boarding that no such upgrades would be available.

When I queried this he said that this was in fairness to full fare passengers.

I wrote to FGW on this latter point but they were dismissive of the complaint, saying that generally upgrades are available but this of course is dependent on space being available.

When I replied, reiterating that first class was empty, they said they did not keep a log of passenger numbers and relied on the conductor's discretion.

FGW appears to be missing a trick here because availability of weekend first upgrades make travelling at weekends on advance fares attractive. Perhaps this is why FGW does not do it in the belief that it will force customers to pay

full fares. It certainly does not encourage non-essential or holiday journeys like mine, and encourages people to go by car.

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Privatisation

I wonder if I am alone in the membership in asking just why the item "Privatisation boss ousted" was included in issue 119. To me it seems to be nothing more than an exercise in schadenfreude.

I thought I had joined Railfuture to deal with the realities of the future. One regular contributor's column constantly indicates just how fantastic the pre-privatised railways were (or at least the pieces under his control).

Others with less rosy spectacles on the receiving end may not necessarily agree! Nobody likes change but change happens and nobody can say just what situation our railways would be in now had privatisation not happened, or even if the present micro-managing meddlers had not assumed power. Future not past, please.

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Devon metro

I would like to say how much I support the idea by Gerard Dudridge and Railfuture of an Exeter and South Devon metro, with a possible railhead at Goodrington. Since the axing of national rail services to Kingswear for Dartmouth, this area has seen a great increase in car use, not only by choice but by necessity.

The bus services are not good enough to give a choice between car and public transport.

As South Devon is one of the most popular destinations in the UK for tourists, we suffer like many others from congestion and parking problems especially in our smaller towns.

A group exists in the area for promoting a good, fully integrated transport system that is green and sustainable.

The rail line for the proposal already offers probably the finest views from the train of anywhere in the country. The sea wall at Dawlish, the Dart and Exe Valleys and, of course, the South Devon countryside.

The main centres for commerce – Plymouth, Torbay and Exeter – would also benefit from a frequent well-promoted service for residents and visitors alike. Bus services already serve Paignton and Totnes railway stations although not promoted as a rail link, so

maybe these could be reviewed as a part of a truly integrated transport system serving the whole of the county.

For towns like Paignton, Brixham and Dartmouth, to name a few, this could form part of a park-and-ride system, thus helping to manage the county's traffic problems.

I believe the idea needs serious consideration and adoption as soon as possible for the benefit of all – visitors, residents, bus and rail companies and for the county itself – because it reduces pollution, makes roads safer and helps create a much better environment.

I am not suggesting that people be forced from the roads but a good modern alternative should be offered and I believe we will be surprised at the results.

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Political direction

I read in *Railwatch* that Railfuture's international committee prepared a list of railway and transport questions for candidates in the European elections in June.

The committee has asked the political parties to respond rather than individual candidates, apparently on the assumption that MEPs in Brussels behave like puppets responding to party strings pulled in London, tugging our forelocks in respect to party policy

As a strong supporter of railways I read *Railwatch* with interest, and I welcome the enthusiasm of the Railway Development Society, but when it comes to the political process in all its guises I sometimes think you don't have a bloody clue!

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Suburban speed-up

While I sympathise with Cobham line passengers (John Pincham's letter in *Railwatch* 119), mixing suburban with main line services is not the solution. The 17.45 and 18.15 mainline services from Waterloo to Portsmouth are the preserve of passengers using smaller stations south of Guildford. An influx of local passengers would quickly overcrowd these trains.

South West Trains have already subversively downgraded the Portsmouth direct line with unpopular and inappropriate, low-cost class 450s – a trend which Wessex Railfuture is strongly resisting. Rather than meddle with the existing timetable, Cobham line passengers should press a dithering Department for Transport to open Waterloo International platforms for suburban services, thus

increasing frequencies and train lengths. This obvious solution is long overdue.

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Many a true word

In case you didn't catch it, here's a gem from Al Murray's comedy show on ITV1: "I'm proud to be British. Britain leads the world in rail replacement bus services."

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Christmas trains

I get a lot of stick in the Grimsby area for objecting to the shutdown of bus services on Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day. So I was interested to read Lee Davies' letter (*Railwatch* 119) about the lack of trains over this period.

Really the absence of public transport can result in considerable financial disadvantages if people are compelled to use taxis in order to make any form of journey.

I believe working unsocial hours ought to be adequately compensated for, perhaps by a Government that already subsidises free bus travel.

I also have no objection to slightly higher fares at these peak times. We rail travellers are used to paying more to travel at busier hours.

Yet at the end of the day, rail and buses are needed by the community whose interests must come above those who work in the industry. People can after all be given bonus payments or time-off in lieu.

There is some advantage to extra holidays at a time when the days are longer.

Incidentally, I don't like sales on Boxing Day, nor the commercialisation of Christmas but as long as people have to work on days like 26 December, they need the transport to get them to their place of employment.

Not everyone has a car, which is where we in Railfuture come in.

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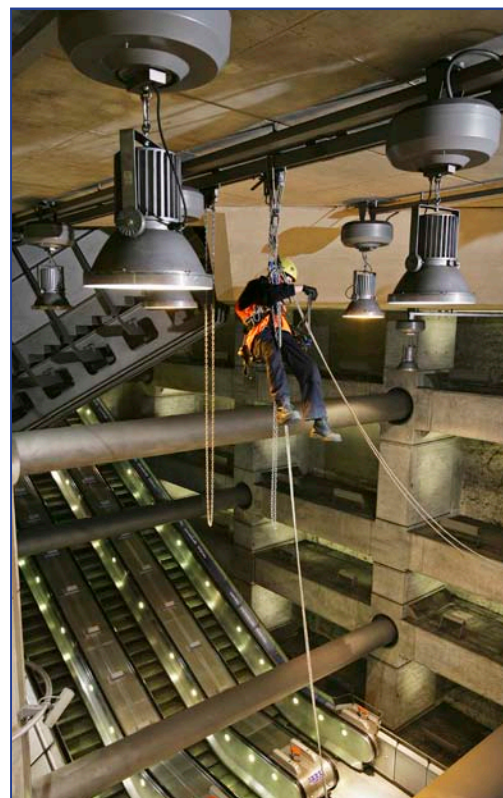
We need trains

I must express my strong disagreement with Lee Davies regarding Christmas trains.

I recall the time when trains ran 365 days a year, and still remember my fear when they were withdrawn in the 1960s that my dad, in poor health, might become critically ill over Christmas and I, as a non-driver and working 200 miles away, might have no means to get to him.

More recently, I had the embarrassing duty of explaining to a German friend planning a brief visit to the UK that it was not his computer at fault when it would not come up with information how to get from Stansted to Norfolk.

I have also had to sympathise with a close friend who had to spend



Passengers sometimes forget the enormous amount of work that goes into keeping the railway operational and the skill and hard work staff are called on to contribute.

In this picture from Tube Lines, specialist abseilers clean the remoter areas and change light bulbs at Westminster Tube station. The operation takes place every eight to 10 weeks when the station is closed.

a miserable Christmas Day in a hotel, away from her stay-at-home family, to await her flight abroad on Boxing Day.

Railways were being run down in the Beeching era, in the mistaken belief that car travel was taking over for everyone, without any idea of the congestion this would cause nor of the environmental impacts.

Today even the Government admits that it is desirable to use public transport where possible. We have also joined the European Union where railways run over Christmas.

The past 40 years have seen many social changes. Geographical mobility means many people need to travel considerable distances to be with family and friends over Christmas. Homes tend to be smaller and do not admit "house parties".

Conscientious drivers are expected to heed the regular warnings about drink driving. How much money does the Government spend every year on its drink-driving campaigns, especially in the run-up to Christmas?

How much opposition can we expect from the rail unions? When services were halted in the 1960s they in fact opposed the change. In those days the accepted ethos in the rail industry was that they were supplying a social service, just like the emergency services who take Christmas work for granted.

We should remind the railway industry that many of its workers are still permeated by this ethos despite political pressure to replace it with a strictly business one.

We are not asking for commuter train frequency. A Sunday service would be adequate, and there would be no need for everyone to work every year. Where is the

money to come from? We cannot be optimistic enough to expect a restored service to be so heavily used from the word go that it would pay for itself – though we must also remember that reopening stations and lines has usually led to heavier use than forecast.

Also it has been noted that where bus services have been run over Christmas, they were well-used. We must remind the authorities that airlines function on the holidays and rail access is needed to airports. The tourist industry would benefit greatly.

So what excuse is there for allowing Britain to be the laughing stock of the EU – just when we need visitors?

Of course there is a need for engineering work from time to time. The shutdowns are not limited to Christmas, nor is it feasible to carry them out on the same days throughout the network. But replacement buses, however unwelcome, are preferable to no service at all.

Recent and still ongoing drastic fare rises have been justified on the grounds that they are needed for improving services. Providing Christmas services would show there is some truth in this claim.

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Holiday service

I refer to the thoughtful letter from Lee Davies which appears in *Railwatch* 119 and to his suggestion that there be a debate on this issue.

I note that there has been criticism of the fact that no trains run on Christmas Day but I cannot personally support such complaints. Surely it is possible for most people to plan their holidays and their family visits, without having to

travel by train on that day or, for that matter, on Boxing Day? The fact that football clubs might wish to play and that some store owners might wish to start sales on Boxing Day is hardly a reason or justification for the rail network to be opened. The goods will still be in stores the following day and would even be still there on 2 January if stores delayed their January sales.

If football clubs wish to have support for Boxing Day matches they could spend the equivalent of a stars' weekly salary on chartering coaches to provide free travel for their supporters or else they too could defer the matches by 24 hours if coach operators also wished their staff to have a couple of days holiday.

Alternatively, if it is the case that there is an overwhelming demand for train services on either day then the staff concerned, all of them, should be paid premium rates recouped by tickets priced at suitably high levels to cover all costs.

It should also be the case that no one should be forced to work if they have religious beliefs or if they have family commitments.

It is perhaps also pertinent to point out when comparing UK practice with what happens in Europe that Christmas does not have the same significance or level of observance in many other countries whose holiday patterns may vary considerably. When football and shopping appear in a list of priorities perhaps our values have become just a little out of balance.

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Unfair comment

Lee Davies's letter under the heading of Christmas Trains (*Railwatch* 119) makes quite a few good points but in his comments on "so-called" football fans he shows that he is as out of touch on that subject as the *Independent* newspaper he refers to is about railways.

Modern-day football fans, of which I am one, are far-removed from the hooligans of the distant past.

As well as including many more women and children these days, the high cost of attending matches means that the majority of followers are much more prosperous and correspondingly sensible than ever they used to be.

Few of these people are willing to commit acts which could lead to them losing their jobs, freedom or season tickets and Mr Davies insults a large swathe of society who are enthusiasts in their chosen pastime just as all of us in Railfuture are about ours.

If he wishes to return to the days of using old rolling stock for travelling fans, that's fine provided that we are charged old prices!

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