

railwatch

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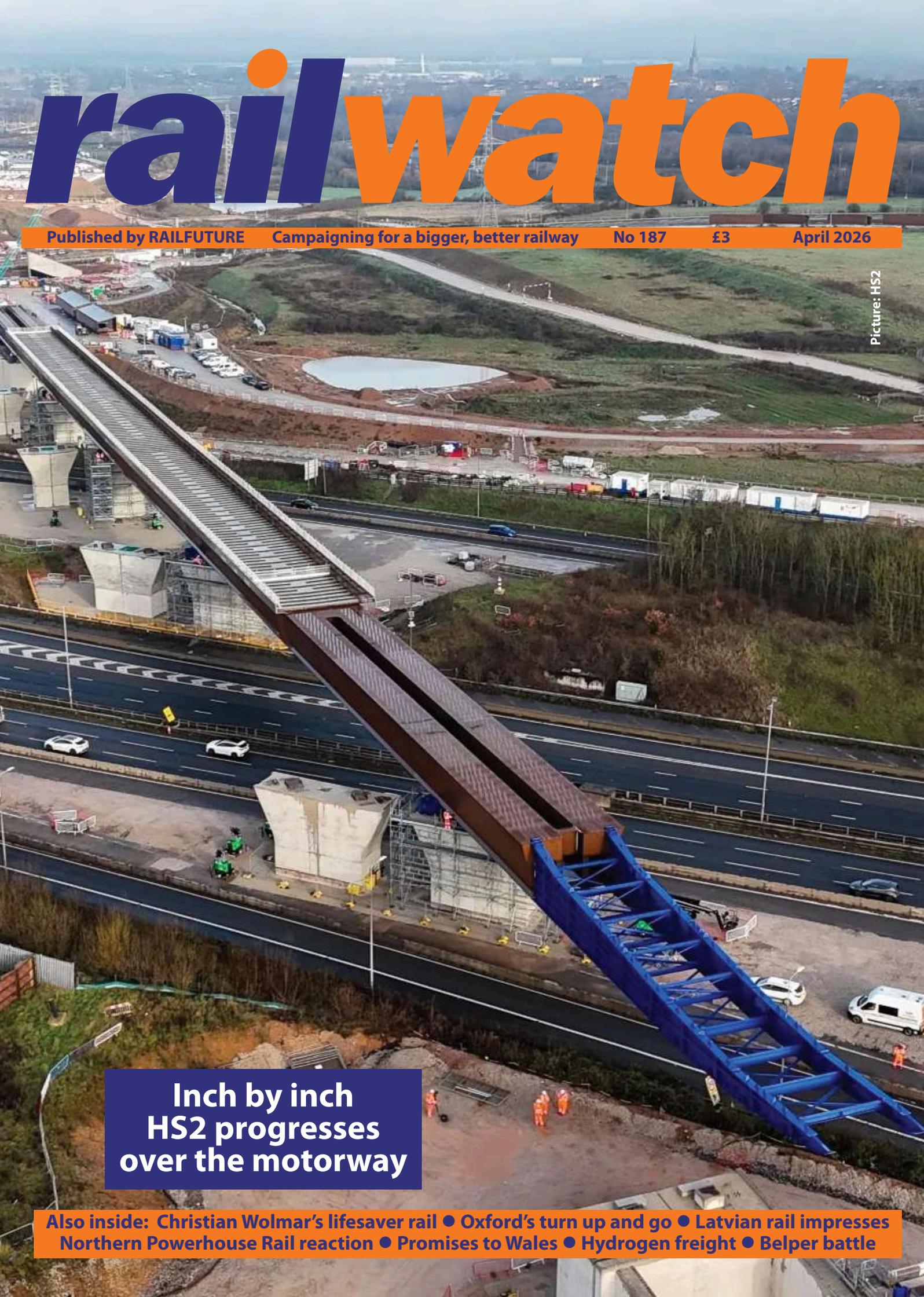
Campaigning for a bigger, better railway

No 187

£3

April 2026

Picture: HS2



**Inch by inch
HS2 progresses
over the motorway**

Also inside: Christian Wolmar's lifesaver rail • Oxford's turn up and go • Latvian rail impresses Northern Powerhouse Rail reaction • Promises to Wales • Hydrogen freight • Belper battle

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Railfuture goes to Westminster

Over and under, HS2 makes progress

PAGE ONE PICTURE

High speed London-bound trains will travel over the M6 motorway near Birmingham Airport on the viaduct pictured on page one.

The 4,600 tonne east deck, which will carry twin tracks, was slid into place in a 17-hour operation near Chelmsley Wood in December while motorway traffic continued to pass underneath. The west deck, with another two tracks carrying trains to Birmingham, will be installed later. The complex operation involves crossing M6-M42 link roads and slip roads, and the River Tame.

Each HS2 viaduct over the M6 is a hollow double-box structure made from weathering steel, which develops a protective oxidised surface, giving a "rusty" appearance and reducing the need for repainting.

Another major step forward for HS2 took place in January when a tunnel boring machine was launched from Old Oak Common towards London's Euston station. The machine was named Madeleine, after Madeleine Nobbs, former president of the Women's Engineering Society.

Rail minister Lord Hendo said: "We are putting HS2 back on track, and taking the railway into central London is crucial to unlocking its full potential to deliver more jobs, more homes and a long-term boost to the whole British economy."

HS2 Ltd CEO, Mark Wild, said: "Over the past 12 months, I have been leading a comprehensive reset across HS2 to get it back on track and I am confident that we are on the right path to delivering HS2 safely and efficiently." London transport commissioner Andy Lord said: "At Transport for London, we are working closely



NEXT STOP EUSTON: HS2 chief executive Mark Wild, left, and rail minister Lord Hendo start tunnel boring machine Madeleine towards Euston from Old Oak Common in west London

with our partners to ensure the best possible experience for customers interchanging between London Underground, London Buses, HS2 and National Rail services at Euston."

Jules Pipe, London's deputy mayor for planning, said: "This is an important milestone as this much-needed new high speed rail line will boost the UK economy by £41 billion and support 34,000 new jobs, while delivering 22,000 more homes for Londoners over the next decade."

A new body, the Euston Delivery Company, will lead delivery of an affordable and integrated transport hub – including the new HS2 station, the redevelopment of the existing station, and upgrades to the London Underground station – along with commercial development across the Euston campus.

Greater use of railways saves lives, lots of them

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

By Christian Wolmar

The Spanish high speed rail accident in January broke the astonishing safety record of high speed trains. Since their inauguration in Japan in 1964, there had not been an accident involving services running on dedicated track at full speed resulting in multiple passenger deaths. As I set out in my forthcoming book, *Fast Track*, to be published by Penguin in June, there have been accidents involving high speed trains such as Eschedde in 1998 and Santiago di Compostella in 2014, but these have occurred on conventional tracks or on test runs.

So the Spanish disaster was unprecedented, a stain on a fantastic record. The disaster seems to have been caused by a simple failure, a broken rail, rather than anything specific to high speed.

I have to confess I had a lucky escape in relation to the new book. In the draft I completed in December, I wrote about high speed rail's amazing safety record but then added "perhaps by the time you read this there will have been a disaster". There was!

I am now adding a section on this terrible accident, but it did bring home to me how safety on the

railways can never be ignored. In the 30 years I have been writing about railways, the accident rate has plummeted but only after the terrible blip in the aftermath of privatisation when there were four major accidents within five years. In a revealing interview for my *Calling All Stations* podcast, Gerald Corbett, the longest serving chief executive of Railtrack, set out how privatisation and fragmentation contributed to the two disasters that happened on his watch, Ladbroke Grove in 1999 and Hatfield a year later. Corbett is a decent man, who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and bore no responsibility for these tragedies but was forced out of Railtrack after Hatfield. In the interview, he was remarkably frank about how privatisation and fragmentation had contributed to the two accidents. He explained how there had been a whole series of SPADs (signals passed at danger) in the Paddington approaches before the disaster. Because of the lack of coordination between the parties involved, the recommendation to have a signal

sighting committee was never fulfilled. There were several other ways in which fragmentation contributed to that disaster. He pointed out that there was no "guiding mind" who could see the wider railway picture. Hatfield, too, was a result of the way the industry had been rushed into a new structure. The accident was caused by a broken rail which had not

been replaced or crucially had a speed restriction imposed on it. The extent of the damage could not be seen, as a result of a cutback in the number of people walking the track. The maintenance company, Balfour Beatty, was seeking to cut costs, because under the contract with Railtrack, payments were reduced each year. Corbett is critical of

the fact that the maintenance companies were privatised in the first place, but also argues that the incentives were not aligned. The train operators were seeking to run more trains, which imposed greater costs on the maintenance companies whose budgets were being cut. It made no sense.

This is a salutary reminder that

safety must remain a priority. The creation of Great British Railways will require reorganisation and people moving to new jobs. Unlike privatisation, this should bring greater cohesion and improved safety. However, there are risks in any upheaval and industry leaders must ensure nothing goes wrong.

If a wider perspective is taken, the very existence of the railways saves lives, thanks to its far greater safety record compared with driving.

The death rate per billion miles for road vehicles is around five, so one could effectively say that the usage of the railways saves 125 lives a year let alone all the serious injuries it prevents.

In America, where passenger railways barely exist, there are 40,000 annual deaths on the road. How many lives could be saved if they had not axed their passenger rail network?

The Spanish disaster is a setback, as were the post privatisation disasters in the UK, but they should not detract from the key message: Greater rail use saves lives, lots of them.

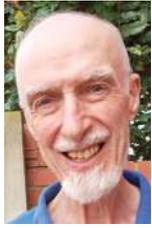
■ I am now producing a weekly substack. Please sign up for free or go for premium and get lots of extra features at

<https://transportnews.substack.com/>



Christian Wolmar

Oxford's turn-up-and-go railway



By Andrew McCallum

An ambitious plan for an Oxford Metro is one of the proposals in Oxfordshire County Council's vision for a rail future. It includes a "turn up and go" frequency on all routes serving Oxford, three new stations plus the reopened Cowley line, redevelopment at Oxford station and capacity enhancement on the line between Didcot and Oxford.

The proposals are revealed in Oxfordshire County Council's *OxRAIL2040: Plan for Rail* which was adopted by the council in November 2025.

Railfuture director Roger Blake was invited to speak to the full council, following a consultation process in which Railfuture was closely involved thanks to the council's rail development lead, Pete Brunskill (see *Railwatch* 186 p20).

It is noteworthy that a month earlier the council passed the following resolution: "Conditionally approve an allocation of up to £10 million from the retained funding for Enterprise Zone 1 (Science Vale) to enable the delivery of priorities arising from the forthcoming OxRAIL strategy." This is a serious financial commitment.

Additionally, very soon Oxfordshire will have two published strategic outline business case documents which it has funded: Oxford-Carterton as a new line with three, maybe four, new stations, and Vale of White Horse Parkway as a new station on an existing high-speed mixed-use line.

The plan rightly puts rail at the heart of the county's economy, which is led by world class universities and institutes, making Oxford a destination of global significance.

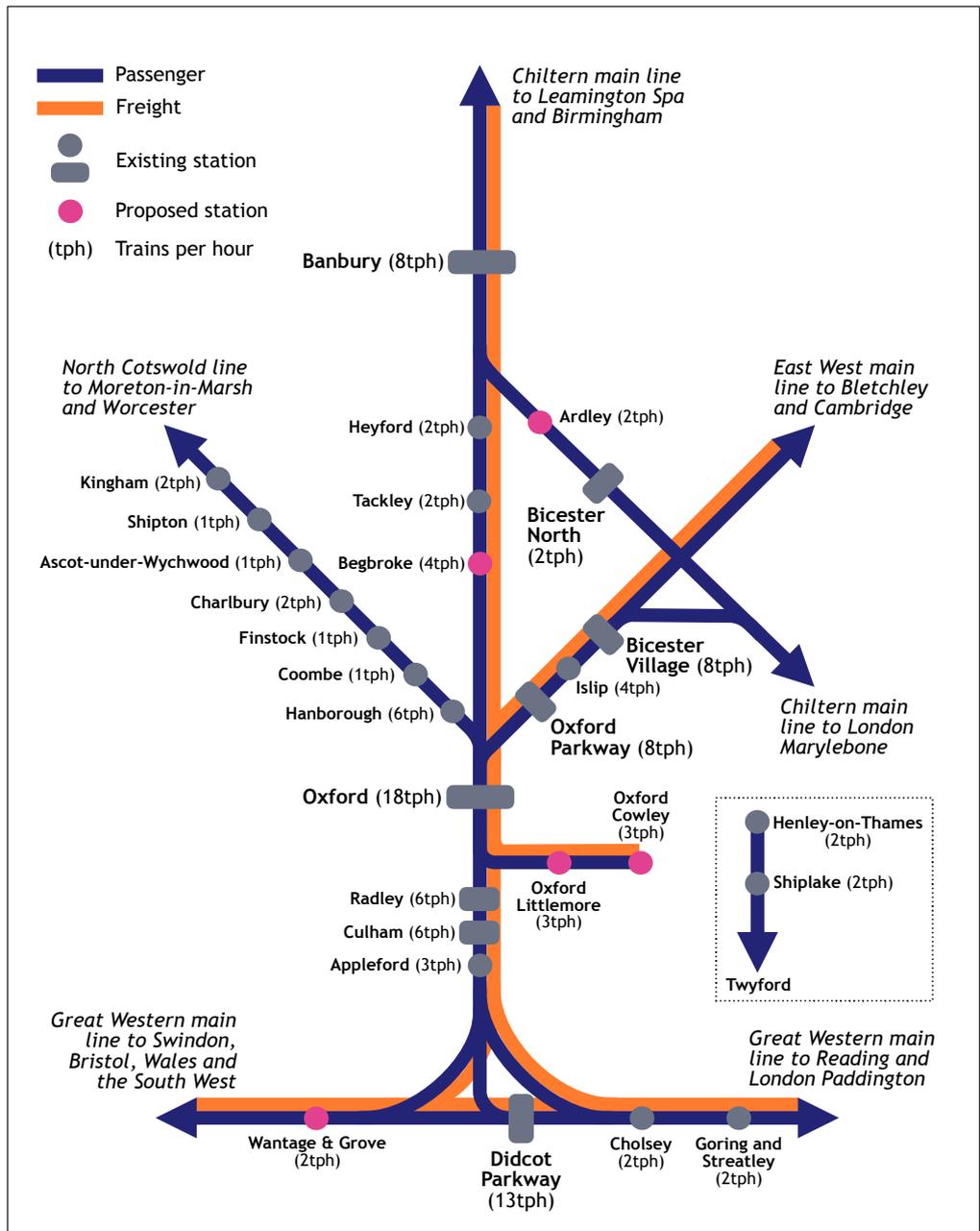
Yet Oxfordshire is a largely rural county and the plan stresses the vital role rail can play in connecting diverse population settlements with the main hubs. It also places into context the key position Oxfordshire holds in the British rail network on both north-south and east-west routes for both passengers and freight.

The plan recognises that Oxford station will need considerable investment, following completion of the current works to expand capacity with a new platform 5, to create a station fitting for Oxford's world class status as a destination.

The station also needs to support the metro type service levels of the future and potentially should be "a destination in its own right", with relevant improvements in facilities, connectivity and the surrounding public realm.

The plan proposes pedestrianisation of Hythe Bridge Street, the main walking route between station and city centre. In addition to the two new stations on the Cowley line, there would be a new station at Wantage/Grove, as well as others at Begbroke and Ardley. The new stations would support substantial local housing and employment growth.

Among other investments in the plan are the re-doubling of the North Cotswold line to Hanborough with twice the current train frequencies, four-tracking between Oxford and Radley, electrification between Didcot and Bletchley via East West Rail, and the revival of Network Rail's earlier concept of grade separation at Didcot East junction. The demand



The proposed train service specification in the county council's OxRAIL2040 plan



for a railway for Witney and Carterton is recognised although it is considered to be beyond the time frame for this plan.

OxRAIL2040 supports some schemes beyond the county, including remodelling at Coventry to increase capacity, electrification between Basingstoke and Reading and enhancements to the east-facing bay platforms and the Brunel Arcade at Reading station. There is of course a lot more detail in the plan which can be read online. Search for "oxrail2040planforrail"

The three phases cover up to 2040 and some of the timescales are frustratingly far away in the future.

Nevertheless there is a lot of ground covered in this ambitious plan and it is perhaps a model for other counties to adopt to secure the rail enhancements needed to boost their economies and connect people to work, education, health and leisure activities.

Phase 1 to 2030 includes Oxford station platform 5, the Cowley line and an Oxford-Bristol service. **Phase 2 to 2037** includes the Oxford station improvements, four-tracking Radley-Oxford, Wantage/Grove station and Chiltern main line electrification. **Phase 3 to 2040** involves the complete electrification of East West Rail, as well as to Banbury and beyond, plus a new station at Ardley and a West Oxfordshire mass transit system.

The plan makes clear the need for greater capacity on the north-south route through Oxford for growth of passenger and freight services, in line with what Railfuture Thames Valley chairman Richard Stow told the Oxfordshire Citizen's Assembly in September.

Railfuture Thames Valley strongly supports this plan, which includes all our campaigning objectives. We look forward to working with Oxfordshire County Council to ensure its implementation over the coming years.

- More Thames Valley campaign news: Page 20
- Andrew McCallum is secretary of Railfuture Thames Valley

Wait for it! Innovation in the Heart of Wales

By Julian Langston

Signalling a railway is time-consuming and expensive. Design work, possessions, testing and retesting take huge resources, and that is not counting the capital cost of equipment.

So it is difficult to justify signalling investment on lightly used rural lines, such as the Heart of Wales line linking Swansea with Shrewsbury.

Signalling on the mostly single track line is basic, with block sections (the stretch of line between adjacent signals) taking up to 40 minutes to traverse at line speed.

This can be a problem at user-controlled level crossings, where users – possibly farmers or walkers – must phone the signaller to obtain permission to cross. Three minutes is considered a safe crossing time, but while the signalling system might know there is a train in a block, it does not know where in the block it is.

In the worst-case scenario, a user wishing to cross the line at one end of the block may have to wait nearly 40 minutes. Farmers, for whom time is money, are reluctant to wait so long for a train to pass.

There are 126 such crossings on a 90-mile stretch of line used by Heart of Wales services.

Help may be at hand

The Derby-based company Universal Signalling is trialling a system called U-Cross on an 11-mile section of the line between Llandovery and Llandeilo.

U-Cross enables the signaller to know the precise location of a train and estimate the time to a given crossing to within a few seconds, so users should rarely have to wait more than three minutes for a train to pass.

First demonstrated at the Global Centre of Rail Excellence in Onllwyn in 2024, U-Cross works by using beacons, installed between the rails approximately 30 sleepers apart.

Installation involves simply hammering a small green-disc beacon on to a sleeper.

A trolley carrying a beacon reader coupled with a high-grade GPS locator accurately maps the position of the beacon. The data is uploaded to a central database.

In service, a reader on the train reads the beacon's identity and transmits it to the signalling centre (in this case the signal box at Pantyffynnon). Here, the software looks up the beacon's location from its database and displays the train's location,



HEART OF WALES: A class 150 train at Pantyffynnon station, 10 miles south of the section where trial beacons have been installed

Picture: UNIVERSAL SIGNALLING



Left: A beacon is nailed to the sleeper. Right: The GPS locator and the beacon reader (protected from the rain by a modified bird bath) are mounted on a rail trolley. The beacon's GPS location is relayed to the central database. Cardboard boxes of beacons can be seen on the right of the trolley

including the estimated time to reach crossings in the section. The display is colour-coded:

GREEN The train has passed and crossing is completely safe

RED The train is expected within three minutes: do not cross

YELLOW The train is expected to take more than three minutes and crossing is permitted.

To be safe, the system assumes the train will be travelling at line speed. The beauty of the system is that it is



Picture: GREEN SIGNALS

extremely cheap to install. No design work is needed in advance, and the beacons cost £30 each including installation.

The installation was completed over the 11-mile trial stretch with only a few night possessions.

The beacon reader fits on the train's headlamp bracket. It can be taken on and off as required, and no modification to the train is necessary.

The GPS locator, used to map the beacons' positions on installation, is

protected from the weather by a modified bird bath, bought online for £10!

It costs about £2,100 per mile to install the beacons. Clearly there are other costs, but the whole idea is to keep these down.

By comparison, the cost of installing one signalling equivalent unit is estimated as £270,000 by Railfuture vice-president Roger Ford.

U-Cross was installed on the Llandovery-Llandeilo trial section with help from Network Rail and Transport for Wales.

"It has been a real, real joy to bring something different to our railway," said Network Rail route director Nick Millington. "Why here, why this particular route then? In the Wales and Borders area, we have got a lot of rural routes.

"There is not a great deal of money around, so we need to use something different. We need to innovate our way to a safer space. So, on this particular route we're not going to spend an awful lot of money resignalling it."

So, what of the future?

It is hoped the trial will give confidence in U-Cross, as well as demonstrating component reliability, which will be clearer in a few months. Beacons will fail, but losing a few should not markedly degrade the system.

The next phase is to apply U-Cross to the full 90-mile Heart of Wales line.

Ultimately, Universal Signalling wants to extend this and other low-cost signalling systems it is developing to branch lines across Britain.

"U-Cross is the first stepping stone towards our vision for next-generation digital signalling that is affordable for rural lines," said chief executive Stephen Head.

"What truly sets this apart is the speed of deployment, which drives down cost to the railway."

U-Cross is not a signalling system. It is an enhancement for the basic signalling found on many lightly used lines. It is not necessarily suitable for busier routes, which are better signalled.

If it works as intended, Universal Signalling's vision of installing this and other systems in days, not decades, will improve the useability and affordability of many rural railways.

Railwatch is grateful to Green Signals for permission to use some of the material in this article, including two of the pictures shown.

For more information, see:

www.greensignals.org/podcast/railway-signalling-in-days-not-decades/

■ Julian Langston is treasurer of Railfuture Cymru/Wales

Derby at the heart of government's rail agenda



By Anthony Kay

Derby North MP Catherine Atkinson has told Railfuture East Midlands members that she is proud of the city's continuing major role in the railway industry.

Derby has already been chosen as the location for the headquarters of Great British Railways, and the MP wants the HQ to be located in the city centre.

However, she agrees that transport investment per capita in the East Midlands was only half the national average in 2023-24.

On a more positive note, new East Midlands Mayor Claire Ward has secured £2 billion from the government to spend on transport over the next five years.

Railfuture East Midlands organised the meeting at the Aston Court Hotel in Derby in January with Ms Atkinson as guest speaker.

Ms Atkinson was a member of the Commons transport committee until October, when she was appointed a parliamentary private secretary.

She was joined later in the meeting by Baggy Shanker, the MP for Derby South, who is currently a member of the Commons transport committee.

The focus of the meeting was the future of rail nationally rather than local issues, and invitations were sent to representatives of the rail industry, local government and stakeholders including rail user groups and transport campaign groups, as well as Railfuture members.

Ms Atkinson said the government is fully committed to rail, as shown by the legislation for the railways to be brought into public ownership



MP Catherine Atkinson addresses Railfuture members at Derby in January. Seated are Richard Bradford (left) and Stephen Chaytow

being one of its first acts following the last general election. She is keen for there to be a continuous pipeline of railway development work, rather than the boom and bust of recent years, so that a workforce with railway skills can be maintained and enlarged.

The two MPs answered questions submitted in advance by participants. The first questions concerned the work of the Commons transport committee and the system of government, given the "churn" of ministers.

Ms Atkinson reassured us that Lord Hendy, rail minister since the general election, is highly knowledgeable about the railways.

Responding to a question about decarbonisation, she said she supported complete electrification of the Midland main line, but that bimode trains and battery power do have a role, in particular where certain stretches of a line would be very expensive to electrify.

Infrastructure and rolling stock strategies therefore need to be formulated together. She pointed out that whereas new railway lines have obvious benefits in the growth

agenda, it can be more difficult to justify electrification of an existing line in terms of growth.

A rolling stock strategy is expected to be published this year, and it is important to maximise compatibility of rolling stock types to improve efficiency.

The government wants to develop transport strategies over a much longer term than the five years between elections. There is also a need for much better connectivity between all the non-car transport modes.

It was pointed out that the average speed of freight on the railways is 25mph. Given that putting freight on rail makes a major contribution to decarbonisation (even with diesel traction) and to reducing road congestion, it is important to make rail more effective for freight.

There are capacity issues, but innovations such as in signalling can help mitigate these.

Railfuture and other stakeholders were encouraged to engage with their MPs and with the East Midlands mayor. The success of GBR would be measured by improvements in reliability and

Picture: STEVE JONES

punctuality, and by a clearly understood long-term strategy.

After the MPs left, a wide-ranging discussion followed.

Carew Satchwell, the rail strategy lead for the East Midlands Combined County Authority, joined a panel of Railfuture committee members. Topics covered included:

- Enthusiasm for decarbonisation appears to be waning nationally, so we need to emphasise the efficiency and economic advantages of electrification.

- The balance between long-distance and local services, particularly on the East Coast main line, but also more generally both between larger cities and into them from intermediate localities.

- Electrified lines have greater passenger capacity (longer trains) than lines operated by diesels.

- Tram networks, particularly the proposal for Derby and the need for further extensions of the Nottingham network. Designs should be prepared in advance, ready for when funding is granted.

- There is still over-30-year-old rolling stock while train makers have a dearth of orders.

- Discontinuous electrification may appear an economic choice in the short term, but will be more expensive over the longer term. Discontinuous electrification of East-West Rail will prevent, for example, all-electric trains being used on a Birmingham-Cambridge service via Milton Keynes. Battery technology should be used only when there is really no alternative.

The meeting was chaired by Peter Small, with committee members Richard Bradford, Stephen Chaytow, Steve Jones and Ian Clark having a major input, including meeting the technical challenges of making it available online.

East Midlands

Anthony.kay@railfuture.org.uk

Transport talk

East Midlands mayor Claire Ward has opened a Big Transport Conversation, inviting residents, businesses and community groups to help shape a vision for transport over the next 15 years. Railfuture East Midlands has responded, listing improvements wanted on existing lines and stations, as well as calling for three new stations: Clay Cross, Toton and Derby South Parkway.

The age of Aurora dawns

The first East Midlands Railway service to be operated by a Hitachi Aurora bimode train was the 0700 from Sheffield to St Pancras on 3 December 2025, three years later than originally programmed. The change between electric and diesel

traction at South Wigston (tantalisingly only three miles from Leicester) is smooth, but Railfuture will be joining the chorus of campaigners and councils calling for electrification of the entire Midland main line to Nottingham and Sheffield.

If the recently announced Northern Powerhouse Rail plan delivers new electrification north of Sheffield, it would be bizarre to leave a gap in the electric network through the East Midlands.

MP backs Ivanhoe line reopening

Amanda Hack MP (NW Leicestershire) led a Westminster Hall debate in January on restoring passenger services to the Ivanhoe line (Leicester to Burton-on-Trent), during which both she and Samantha Niblett, the MP for South

Derbyshire, referred to the work done by the Campaign for the Reopening of the Ivanhoe Line. She noted that housing growth around the line has been greater than the average in the East Midlands and mentioned the difficulties many of her constituents have when their only transport option has been unreliable bus services. She pointed out the irony of workers at Siemens Mobility, a rail technology company located in Ashby-de-la-Zouch, not being able to travel to work by rail, and that the National Forest, a project to improve the environment, can be accessed only by car even though the Ivanhoe line runs through the middle of it. She also mentioned the awkwardness of securing funding for a project that crosses local authority boundaries, with the Ivanhoe line passing

through Leicestershire, Derbyshire (within the East Midlands mayoral area) and Staffordshire.

Rail could transform park travel

Railfuture and Friends of the Derwent Valley Line (Derby-Matlock) have both responded to the consultation on a local plan for the Peak District national park. Railfuture has criticised the lack of ambition to combat the unsustainable increase in road traffic in the park, pointing out how traffic could be reduced by improved rail services, including the reinstatement of the Peaks and Dales line (Derby-Manchester), together with better rail-bus connectivity.

[www.railfuture.org.uk/
East+Midlands+Branch](http://www.railfuture.org.uk/East+Midlands+Branch)
[X@RailfutureEMids](https://twitter.com/RailfutureEMids)

Count to 10. Reasons to be angry Part II

By Neil Middleton

In *Railwatch* 186 (December 2025) I wrote "Count to ten – reasons to be angry" on operator LNER's Simpler Fares trial.

Since then I have met LNER to discuss the trial and hear what LNER see as some of the key benefits.

It is worthwhile starting by looking at a key statistic on types of ticket purchased.

LNER has mapped Super Off-Peak next to Semi-Flex, but my preference is a two-way split, to match Flexible and then Fixed/70 minute together, because both of the latter require a time to be chosen.

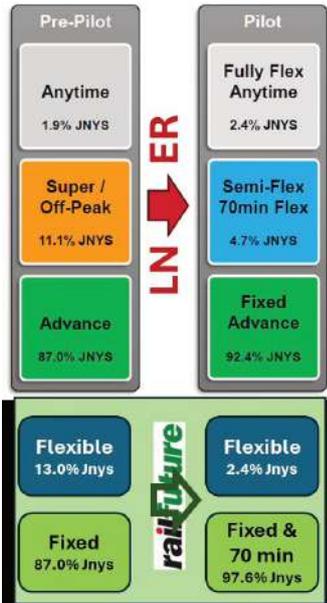
LNER said that its research showed a passenger preference for Simpler Fares over what was previously available.

Their CSAT score (search for Qualtrics CSAT if curious) for "Satisfaction with overall booking process" moved from 82% to 86%.

Some of the detail shows that members of their customer panel were less impressed, which I find interesting as **a)** they are probably more regular travellers and **b)** they probably understood the old ticket types better than average.

When the trial started, LNER's goals might have resulted in a significant fare increase for up to 1 in 3 travellers who previously purchased off-peak tickets. In practice, this has turned out to be around 1 in 10. An almost doubling of fares was a possibility for (a different) 1 in 10; the actual outcome is 1 in 100.

I think it is also important to recognise that a good portion of travellers are having a better experience as they have a much



better chance of having a seat, something that is essential for most longer journeys.

So, what next? Well, what I learnt from LNER still does not make me like the new Simpler Fares product, but I do recognise that simply seeking a return to the previous arrangement of Anytime, Super Off-Peak and Advance is not going to be productive.

LNER will point to the positives in their data and probably point out that their market has fundamentally changed and is now leisure dominated.

So, Railfuture is now going to design and publish its own ideas for the evolution of the Simpler Fares product. Keep your eyes on the Railfuture website and social media for updates. If you would like to be more involved, do get in contact.

■ Neil Middleton is Railfuture vice-chair

Railfuture Member of the Year 2025

Would you like the opportunity to win a prize – and to help identify a Railfuture star?

Now is the time to nominate Railfuture's Member of the Year 2025.

The award will be presented at the AGM in July 2026 when the winner will receive a prize.

The person nominating the winner will receive one year's membership of Railfuture free!

The winner would join an exemplary list of past winners, who include:

Ariadne Tampion, Dennis Fancett, Jane Ann Liston, Ann Hindley.

So if you know an individual Railfuture member who has "gone the extra mile" and deserves recognition, for example by raising the profile of Railfuture in their local area or successfully running an event encouraging new members to get involved, then we would like to hear about them.

□□□□□□

To enter:

Please provide a written statement of no more than 350 words explaining why they deserve to be recognised and how they have "gone that extra mile".

All Railfuture individual members (not rail user group members) are eligible to be nominated.

The nominations will be assessed by a group of vice-presidents and others who will make a recommendation to organiser Wendy Thorne.

□□□□□□

The deadline for nominations to be received is 1 June 2026

For further details or to submit a nomination please email Wendy Thorne at

wendy.thorne@railfuture.org.uk



Doncaster-Scunthorpe line campaigner Ann Hindley, right, was the 2023 winner, presented with her award by organiser Wendy Thorne
Picture: Railwatch



Jane Ann Liston, secretary of Railfuture Scotland, won the 2022 award for the St Andrews reopening campaign
Copyright: D C Thomson



Dennis Fancett, chair of the South East Northumberland Rail User Group, presented by Allison Cosgrove in 2021 for the Northumberland Line reopening campaign success
Picture: Dave Shaw

Railfuture vacancy

Railfuture needs a finance director to take over from Jerry Alderson from 5 July 2026

You will have three or four volunteer assistants

Interested? Please contact

jerry.alderson@railfuture.org.uk

or

chris.page@railfuture.org.uk

Lottery winners

November F Golding, D Stocks, A McFie, T Davies, C Fribbins, D Fleming

December P Clark, L Fryer, G Wood, G Smith, P Geall, A McFie

January C Fox, E James, R Hall, W Morrison, F Golding, G Smith

Join the Lottery

Railfuture Lottery profits go towards the Fighting Fund, which supports the campaigns our members are working on. For £12 per year for 12

entries, you can take part and could win one of six prizes every month. Multiple entries are possible.

Taking part is easy – contact lottery@railfuture.org.uk and decide how many entries you want every month and how you would like to pay: via online banking, Paypal or cheque.

With 72 winners every year and increased prizes in the December draw, give it a try – who knows, you could easily be a winner!
www.railfuture.org.uk/lottery/

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

BOOK REVIEWS BY RICHARD LYSONS

Off The Rails
The Inside Story of HS2
By Sally Gimson
Oneworld Publications £22
294pp ISBN 978-1-83643-017-9

Off The Rails – The Inside Story Of HS2 is promoted as the first major account of HS2 and how it went wrong. It makes gripping reading.

Gimson is a former deputy editor of *Index On Censorship* and has written for two of the Sunday broadsheets, as well as *The Guardian*.

She was also a Camden councillor for seven years, the London borough most affected by HS2.

I read most of *Off The Rails* on one afternoon in early January, just before the announcement on Northern Powerhouse Rail.

When I subsequently read the wide coverage of Northern Powerhouse Rail, I began to encounter a strong feeling of *deja vu*!

Sally Gimson's book is very readable: her journalist background makes her writing both terse and provocative.

The book's subject matter is a fascinating one and the author succeeds in gripping the reader for nearly 300 pages. Gimson has clearly done her homework,



Picture: ONEWORLD PUBLICATIONS

Provocative author

Sally Gimson began her career in journalism working for The Observer and the Sunday Telegraph.

She was also a producer in Berlin for Deutsche Welle TV news. She stood as a parliamentary candidate for the Labour Party in 2010.

She is a contributor to Index on Censorship magazine and has written articles about people and politics for the New Statesman and The Guardian.

Hailing originally from Edinburgh she has always been fascinated with high-speed lines to the North.

Off the Rails is her first book.

reading hundreds of thousands of words in parliamentary reports, articles, blogs, websites and books, including much written by our own president. She has also interviewed umpteen politicians, academics and experts to good effect.

The book opens with a map of HS2's original route which includes a key to the five different phases, four of which were cancelled, along with the Golborne Link (also cancelled).

There is genuine optimism at the start of *Off The Rails* where HS2 is seen as a potential "thrilling project", sparking the collective

imagination. The chapter titles themselves chart the route's history and more recent problems: A Very British Project, Rebellion In The Shires, McLoughlin To The Rescue and A Disaster For Crewe.

The book's chapters go frequently from absurdity to tragedy and we must not forget that there is a human cost to the vast overspend on HS2. Ask the residents of Crewe.

Despite having been a Labour councillor, Gimson is equally critical of both Labour and Conservative governments and politicians.

She finishes the book with a

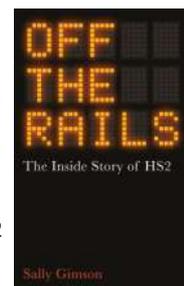
very useful Conclusion chapter, which is required reading for ministers, mayors and civil servants.

The author lists no fewer than 22 lessons to be learned for future rail projects, both obvious ones (Don't rush a complex infrastructure project) and more subtle ones (Be nice. Don't antagonise the people you need onside). Gimson is scathing: "HS2 looked like a train for the rich, not least because it treated the richest and most powerful people along the route far better than the poorest and lost sight of the fact that it needed to be a national railway for all".

I unreservedly recommend this book to *Railwatch* readers and fellow transport campaigners.

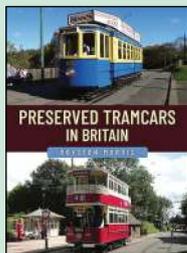
But please, after reading your copy, pass it on to your local MP, elected mayor or transport planner. If those involved in Northern Powerhouse Rail read Sally Gimson's book, it could save us billions of pounds over the next few decades.

■ *Richard Lyons is chair of Friends of Littleborough Stations and co-organiser of the Electric Railway Charter*



Preserved Tramcars in Britain
By Royston Morris
Amberley Publishing £15.99
96pp ISBN 978-1-398-12385-4

I have a couple of tramcar books by Tony Young on my shelves. I was aware that there were many preserved tram museums and collections around the country, but Royston Morris's book reveals that there are over



20 locations where these collections exist. Usefully, these are listed at the front of the book with full addresses and websites. The book's 14 chapters relate the whole history of Britain's trams, from horse-drawn ones through steam trams to electric-powered ones.

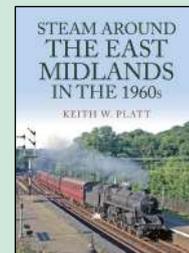
The chapter on Blackpool's trams extends to a dozen pages and is especially interesting to me, as I have visited that seaside resort and conference location many times over the last half century. Morris's colour photographs are of an excellent quality and, as

important for me, his captions are detailed and interesting. The book certainly makes me want to visit more tramway museums.

Steam Around The East Midlands In The 1960s
By Keith W Platt
Amberley Publishing £15.99
96pp ISBN 978-1-398-10570-6

Keith W Platt can just about remember steam trains on our railways. I grew up in Chester and recall steam-powered locomotives at both Chester General and Chester Northgate stations. Platt's book covers a part of the country – East Midlands – that was

unknown to me at the time. This is the first of a new series of books celebrating the steam of 1960s Britain. Platt's book is full of high quality, mostly colour images of the wide range of traffic that was in the East Midlands. Happily, Platt gives useful captions for each picture. This is a specialist book for steam lovers, less for the general reader.



North Wales loses out when trains are diverted to the Settle-Carlisle line

By Richard Wilcock

Avanti West Coast runs the London Euston to North Wales service, mainly to Holyhead. In old money this is an inter-city service using bimode class 805 Intercity Express Trains built by Hitachi.

Over the past few years, the service offered by Avanti West Coast has been below par, particularly on Sundays when five-car class 805s operate many services. Cancellation or delay results in the Transport for Wales service being overcrowded,

particularly as TfW seems to prefer to run two-car class 197s. With the closure of the West Coast line north of Preston for a bridge replacement over the M6, the class 805s have been used to run diversionary services on the Settle-Carlisle line.

The issue for North Wales is the readiness of Avanti West Coast to redeploy these units to the detriment of North Wales, where the line is not electrified. For people in North Wales this is not acceptable. Given that Great British Railways may be the guiding body

in the future, what are the options for this service?

- 1 Stay the same.
- 2 Make the North Wales service a separate unit within GBR services to North Wales would be run as a separate operation.
- 3 For TfW Rail to take over, though it could then be argued it should also take over GWR's Paddington-South Wales service too.
- 4 Have a dedicated GBR service manager to ensure the London-North Wales service is as promised.

No solution is perfect. Electrification of the North Wales line would allow Avanti West Coast to be more flexible with its fleet deployment.

Better co-ordination between TfW Rail and Avanti West Coast would help, even if it meant TfW trains from Crewe waiting for Avanti West Coast services.

In my experience that would be a novelty! What do *Railwatch* readers think?

■ *Richard Wilcock is chair of Railfuture Cymru Wales*

Speller reopenings

Thank you for *Railwatch*. I find it a very helpful magazine.

Unless you can kindly provide me with an answer to my point below, could you please publish this in your next edition.

The Speller Act of 1981 was an Amendment to the Transport Act 1962 by Tony Speller MP of North Devon to allow British Rail to open closed or new railways on an experimental basis, without the need to undertake expensive closure proceedings if the service fails. Its implementation can reduce risk and hence cost. I wonder whether Network Rail and the Department for Transport include this useful Act in such business case appraisals?

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New stations

May I respond to items in *Railwatch* 186 on the cost of new stations and the 40th birthday of Smithy Bridge station, near Rochdale?

The new stations opened in the 1980s in Greater Manchester followed the West Yorkshire precedent, and I well remember visiting Deighton, which opened in 1982. The new stations were mainly origin stations in obvious gaps, and located by an existing bridge, underpass or level crossing, with steps or ramps to the platforms. Typically, there is no car parking or bus interchange, except informally via local roads. The stations are unstaffed and the only buildings are passenger shelters. Smithy Bridge illustrates these points.

The county council elected in 1981 was keen to improve the public transport network in Greater Manchester. Simple new stations were seen as a fast and affordable way of improving accessibility and increasing patronage, thereby making the railway more useful and relevant.

Our target capital cost for a new station was £100k. This covered two wooden platforms with bus shelters and basic information via posters in frames. A footbridge – at extra cost – was provided only where it was not feasible to get access for both platforms via roads or paths. The thinking was to keep costs down, with stations being upgraded as and when. Indeed, one of the new stations, Derker in Oldham, was later rebuilt and repurposed as a park and ride stop on the Metrolink light rail network.

Consultation was important. At Smithy Bridge, the first BR design was for platforms on opposite sides of the crossing. Feedback pointed out that – due to the topography – one platform would shade houses



Picture: NATIONAL HIGHWAYS

Black Cat river bridge to a polluted future

At first glance, it looks like railway tracks are being installed over the River Great Ouse in Bedfordshire.

However, the metal grid pictured is for a bridge which is part of one of the most expensive road projects in Britain, and part of a long-distance east-west road, ten miles of which will open next year to link Black Cat “corner” on the A1 to Caxton Gibbet, 12 miles from Cambridge. It will undoubtedly attract more road traffic – and pollution.

However, in a few years’ time East West Rail will be constructing a rail bridge over the Ouse as part of the Bedford-Cambridge section of EWR, giving the promise of a less-polluted transport future. The railway is expected to cross the Ouse close to the new road bridge with a Tempsford interchange

station being planned nearby, initially serving the East Coast main line but later incorporating services of up to five trains per hour on EWR.

The government is expecting up to 40,000 homes to be built near Tempsford station as part of an 11-mile-long “linear new town” stretching from Eaton Socon to Sandy. Tempsford, though, is just one part of major house building planned for the entire Oxford-Cambridge arc, sometimes trumpeted as “Europe’s silicon valley”.

Transport secretary Heidi Alexander has said: “East West Rail is more than a railway – it is a catalyst for growth, more jobs and opportunity, and this project will make rail travel faster, greener and more reliable for millions of passengers.”

in the adjacent street. So we changed the layout and put the two platforms together on the side of the crossing away from the houses. At another new station, the local road name had been suggested as the station name, but councillors preferred a place name. So that station is ‘Flowery Field’ rather than ‘Bennett Street’. After all, ‘Bennett St’ could be anywhere.

Since the 1980s, standards have improved. Nowadays, access only via steps is a no-no, and passengers expect ticket machines, CCTV and real-time information. So today’s stations will be dearer. Later stations have included interchange and destination stations such as Salford Crescent (1987) and Manchester Airport (1993). Such stations are more substantial: they deal with more passengers, have more facilities and are staffed. They also cost more!

Keith Rogers (formerly with Greater Manchester Council), Bramhall, Stockport SK7 2BT

Disillusioned x 3

I was asked to give some indication of the reasons for allowing my Railfuture membership to lapse. Put

simply, I am increasingly disillusioned with the whole business.

Disillusioned with the railways

I am disillusioned with the poorer quality of the experience of rail travel: airline-style seating not necessarily aligned with the windows; poor customer service when once I chose to travel “first class” on Avanti West Coast; and station staff once using the PA system (and once just shouting) to tell me to “Keep back from the platform edge! Stand behind the yellow line! It’s there for your safety!”

Disillusioned with Railfuture

I understand that Railfuture was in favour of HS2 (although the president personally was against it). I can see why there was so much initial enthusiasm for a high speed railway between London and the north, but Railfuture appears to have been behind the curve as the costs mounted and HS2 north of Birmingham was scrapped. Now I read that the non-tilting trains from the HS2 line will be slower than the tilting trains when running north of Lichfield – and that HS2 has platform heights different from the

rest of the network. I may have missed it, but I am disappointed that Railfuture has not appeared to be in the forefront of criticising this stupidity.

With hindsight, all of that money would have been much better spent in a myriad of smaller improvements and extensions of the rail network – although they may not have delivered increased capacity between London and Birmingham. Instead, we are left with a vanity project useful only for people in a hurry to travel from Birmingham to west London and back.

Having spent many childhood holidays in the area, I am mildly interested in the current campaign to reopen the line from Barnstaple to Bideford. However, I was dismayed when a friend passed to me a document dated 1996 (or perhaps 1999) listing some of the targets for reopening at that time – including that particular railway line! Twenty-five or thirty years of patient campaigning has so far achieved nothing!

Disillusioned with government

Now we hear that His Majesty the King can no longer afford to use the

royal train – and so it is to be scrapped. The government is keen to build new houses on redundant or unwanted railway land, thus making more difficult any future rail-based developments, such as a parcel service, for example. Of course, this is not the fault of Railfuture or its loyal band of hard-working volunteers. It is the government that is painfully slow and lacking in enthusiasm for the railways (as is a large part of the electorate). Railfuture has to deal with things as they are, and can only keep trying to get things done, but the lack of real progress is rather disheartening.

PF Smith, Murray Road, Rugby, Warwickshire CV21 3JP

'Awful' livery

Am I the only person who thinks the Great British Railways livery is AWFUL? Incidentally, it should be Great English Railways – as both Scotland and Wales already control their own railways and associated liveries.

Martin James, Egham, Surrey

Editor's note: The GBR livery, designed in-house by the Department for Transport, was described as atrocious and a "mad dog's breakfast" by Design Museum founder Stephen Bayley.

He added: "It projects the values of the sponsoring organisation: artless, careless, clumsy, unintelligent and uncoordinated."

Golden opportunity

The coming of Great British Railways is the ideal time to introduce a new railcard for the thousands of passengers who are too old for the 26 to 30 railcard but way too young for the senior version.

They have 30 years of rail travel ahead of them at full price when they might also have mortgages or exorbitant rent to pay, just at an age when they want to go places and see things.

How about a third off for the beleaguered middle aged?

M A King, East London

Motorway Marples

Interesting to read about the book featuring Ernest Marples, the man who appointed Beeching as British Railways chairman leading to his infamous Beeching Reports (*Railwatch* 186). Of course the

Railwatch welcomes articles/pictures from rail users and user groups

Send material (as early as possible) to: The Editor, 4 Christchurch Square, London E9 7HU Email: editor@railwatch.org.uk

Postal and email addresses may be published unless writers specifically ask to exclude them



Picture: CHRIS GEE

SPECIAL TIME FOR S&C: 46233 Duchess of Sutherland approaching Garsdale station in 2015

Settle-Carlisle's 150 anniversary

Railfuture will be sponsoring a film premiere event to help the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line celebrate the spectacular line's 150th anniversary.

One of the events will be a special steam charter, the "Settle Carlisle 150 Express" scheduled to run from Carlisle to York in May with Battle of Britain class locomotive 34067 Tangmere.

Travellers will be able to enjoy views of the Eden Valley, Yorkshire's Three Peaks (Pen-y-Ghent, Ingleborough and Wharfedale) and Ribbleshead Viaduct, one of Britain's most celebrated railway

structures. The year-long celebration includes other events honouring the historic 72-mile route.

Railway officials were criticised in December when the line was closed for two days as a precaution when there were "amber" warnings of bad weather, although the West Coast main line over Shap remained open.

Commentator Paul Salveson said: "The harm done to people's lives was immense. I cannot condone the decision." He said selective speed restrictions would probably have been a better response.

blame for any cuts lay at the hands of the person they called Motorway Marples. It was perhaps justice that his party lost the election that came the year after the first Beeching Report.

Mind you, the failure to rescind Beeching plans was probably a factor in Labour losing in 1970. Barbara Castle's 1968 Act was welcomed, but it did not prevent lines being axed that could have been saved. This did not just include the Waverley line, but the line from Grimsby to London via Louth and the branch to Mablethorpe which I recall travelling on.

Tim Mickleburgh, Boulevard Avenue, Grimsby DN31 2JP

Floating an idea

I am not a financial expert, but I do keep coming back to an idea that certainly looks sound. We have a situation where government is wary of rail projects (we conspiracy theorists will see the dead hand of the road lobby involved!) yet the vast majority of railway reopenings have been highly successful, usually beyond all predictions. And undoubtedly repaying that original investment many times over

through inward investment. So how to break this log jam?

1 There is a huge reservoir of public and institutional goodwill towards new railways – even hardened motorists tend to see it as a good thing because it might get other cars and buses out of their way

2 So public and institutions should be offered bonds underwritten by the government giving a guaranteed interest rate at the end of a long period – say 10 years

3 Even promises of investment help to release other funds. It might mean a project being given the go-ahead – and I do not mean yet another business case – only when a certain level of investment has been promised. This figure might release match-funding from the government. There are many ways to arrange these things. One interesting option would be to offer bonds in several railway reopening schemes at the same time, and progress the ones that attract the biggest potential investment.

4 The public get their trains back as quickly as possible because with clear local backing, everyone

would have an incentive to move things along. More controversially, the investment vehicle might have control of the whole scheme and appoint contractors that offer the best value for money. As with the successful crowd-funding model, investors could be offered benefits beyond their financial return: travel on the first train, an ongoing discount card and so on.

5 Perhaps of greatest importance in these hard financial times, it would reduce or even eliminate the initial financial investment from the government. Local interest would give clear evidence that a project was viable, but the capital would not need to be repaid until the project was already paying a handsome return.

Rather than simply asking authorities to provide funding, Railfuture should bring public and local businesses onside in a tangible way that government cannot ignore. The Railway Industry Association is talking similar language in its recent report calling for station investment loans.

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CrossCountry relents

The decision taken by CrossCountry at the start of the pandemic to omit station calls at Brockenhurst from their Bournemouth-Manchester service made little sense. Now, after lobbying from local users including Railfuture, we understand that almost all CrossCountry trains will once again call at the New Forest station from May 2026.

We had also asked for direct trains between Southampton and the North East to be reinstated, and we were slightly encouraged to see that one through train from Southampton (Monday-Friday) was re-introduced by CrossCountry in December. Now we understand that the service frequency between Reading and the North East will rise to almost hourly from May 2026. That is obviously welcome, but not if it means more instances of the Bournemouth-Manchester trains running as four-car units instead of five-car or double unit formations.

Last year, we had cause to question another operator omitting station calls. This time it was Great Western Railway, which decided to run some off-peak Portsmouth-Cardiff trains non-stop through Cosham, forcing passengers on to other services "to relieve overcrowding". Online timetables for May 2026 show that these calls are to be reinstated, so we are pleased that common sense has prevailed.

Step-free access go-ahead for stations

Out of the 50 *Access for All* schemes awarded funding for feasibility studies in 2024, four stations are in the Railfuture Wessex area: Dorchester South, Hedge End, Swanwick and Yeovil Junction. We are pleased that all four are now being taken forward to the final design phase, and we hope that station users will benefit from step-free access to platforms very soon.

Progress on open access bid by Alliance

Railfuture continues to receive updates from the manager of Alliance Rail on its bid to run passenger services between Waterloo and Marchwood (on the branch line between Totton and Hythe), interspersed with Southampton-Marchwood shuttles. Alliance has completed a joint timetable exercise with Network Rail which has resulted in a compliant timetable. This now forms part of its submission to the Office of Rail and Road.

Car park charges introduced

South Western Railway seems intent on rolling out its charging regime to car parks at some of the more rural stations on its network, the latest additions being Shawford and Wool. Railfuture understands that charges at urban stations need to be in line with other car parks nearby but the £2 per day charge at isolated rural locations seems petty, and is probably not worth the bother of enforcing.

www.railfuture.org.uk/Wessex+branch



Tony Smale

julian.langston @railfuturewales.org.uk

Meeting with Welsh Labour

Railfuture is continuing its campaign to talk to all political parties standing for the Senedd elections in May by meeting Ken Skates, currently cabinet secretary for transport and North Wales. Welsh Labour will be the third party we have spoken to. We met representatives of Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Conservatives last year. Attempts to contact Reform UK, the Wales Green Party and the Welsh Liberal Democrats have not yet borne fruit.

Dates for your diary

The Railfuture Cymru/Wales AGM takes place on Saturday 11 April in the Transport for Wales offices at Shrewsbury station at 1400. All members of Railfuture and affiliated groups are welcome. Any member in Wales interested in joining the committee is especially welcome. Please email me if you are interested. We hope to have a guest speaker; details will be on railfuturewales.org.uk

Following a successful social meeting in November, Railfuture will be at the Great Western pub in Cardiff city centre to meet members on Monday 20 April between 1400 and 1700. The Great Western is only about a minute's walk from Cardiff Central station – just turn right at the city centre exit from the station.

Heart of Wales line progress

Railfuture welcomes improvements being made by TfW to the Heart of Wales line service, linking Swansea with Shrewsbury through scenic mid-Wales. The cut made to the timetable in 2022, reducing the number of through trains on Monday to Saturday from five to four, was reversed with the December 2025 timetable change. Liberal Democrat Jane Dodds MS applied pressure for the reinstatement in exchange for helping the Welsh government to pass its 2025-26 budget. This good news will help sustain a marked and welcome increase in passenger numbers in 2024-25 of about 20% despite the four trains per day service.

A further boost should result from the introduction of active travel trains. Inspired by a similar initiative on Scotland's West Highland lines, trains will be two single-car class 153 units, with one car converted to carry a large number of cycles. The wild and often mountainous terrain served by the line is well liked by cyclists and ramblers, and these trains are expected to be popular.

However, the launch of active travel trains has been very slow, and they are currently guaranteed on only one service per day in each direction. The Heart of Wales Line Travellers' Association has written to TfW to seek clarification about when the service will be improved. Railfuture endorses this.

Heart of Wales signalling trial: Page 4

Cardiff valleys concerns

Railfuture welcomes TfW's plans to increase services on the Cardiff Valleys lines to a metro frequency of four trains per hour in each valley. This will be made possible when class 398 tram-trains are introduced later this year, adding to the new class 756 trimodes already in service. However, we are concerned that the infrastructure may not cope. There are numerous flat junctions, including at Cardiff Queen Street where 16 trains per hour from the north will converge before diverging again south of the station. There are also numerous single-line sections on the network. With this intense



Picture: ANGUS EICHKHOFF

OVERGROWN: This was the state of the track at Criccieth on the Cambrian line in autumn last year. Criccieth is between Portmadoc and Pwllheli and is 250 miles from London. More significantly it is more than 200 miles from Cardiff by train because to travel there requires a roundabout trip via Shrewsbury (England) and Machynlleth. Progress on improving rail connections in west Wales is slow

frequency at pinch points, it would not take much for the timetable to fall apart. The increased service with new trains has provided moderately reliable and has been popular with passengers. Campaigners believe that rail use is up by as much as 50% over the past year, although official figures are not yet available. We want to see the current growth consolidated by carefully considered service increases. We do not want to see all the good work so far undone by the timetable becoming unreliable. We have written to TfW, voicing these concerns and asking for the timetable of future service upgrades, including the introduction of tram-trains.

Network for North Wales

TfW's new *Network for North Wales* strategy sets out a phased plan for improvement of rail and better connection with buses in the area. It recognises that North Wales is part of the Liverpool City region and includes the need for better connectivity between North Wales and both Liverpool and Manchester airports. Electrification of the main line is proposed, though this has been promised many times and never delivered. Railfuture is not impressed by the word "Metro" in the name as this implies a turn up and go service. The proposal is for a regional service, and the name should reflect this. We also think a Rhyl-Flint-Mold-Wrexham bus service is needed to link the train services to the hinterland. Rail needs integrated bus services to serve the dispersed population away from the coast.

'Unfair' funding

Wales is being deprived of £1.5 billion in rail funding because of the way government money is allocated between projects, it is claimed. Northern Powerhouse Rail is designed to improve connections between the English cities of Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds. Scotland has been granted £2.7 billion rail funding and Northern Ireland £1 billion. Wales gets nothing. The Welsh Liberal Democrats said this repeats the unfairness of the decision to designate HS2 an England and Wales project, which meant Wales was deprived of £1.6 billion of funding allocation. They say the project should have been classified "England only" to trigger consequential funding for Wales.

The current Welsh Labour-minority government said that it would work with the UK government to deliver rail improvements.

www.railfuturewales.org.uk

Latvian Railways make a good impression

Richard Wilcock visited Latvia in September. Here is his impression of the country's railways.

I had an enjoyable four days in Latvia, with the first day visiting the small railway museum in the capital Riga, which consisted mainly of Russian era rolling stock in a yard.

My first trip out from Riga was to the seaside resort at Jurmala (25 kilometres away) on a new Skoda 16Ev electric unit, similar to the Flirts built by Stadler and found in several European countries. The Skodas have not been without their problems, resulting in the company facing penalties.

Ticketing was mainly on the train and based on fare zones, for me 2.5 euros one way. Cheap.

Interestingly, all platforms had been raised to make boarding easier. Many of the support columns for the overhead wiring were being replaced when I was there.

With only basic shelters on the platforms, I did wonder what would it would be like waiting for a train in winter.

Riga Central station is a labyrinth as it is linked to a shopping centre. At platform level, it was basic, certainly for Riga's main station.

My second day was spent going north to Latvia's "winter capital" of Sigulda on a LTG link service (the passenger transport arm of Lithuanian Railways) for which I had to pay a one euro supplement.

The class 730M diesel unit built by the Polish Pesa company, was comfortable but slow. The train, a connecting service from Vilnius to Estonia's capital of Tallinn, takes 10 hours. I am fairly sure it would be quicker by road coach.

The return journey from Sigulda to Riga was on an old Soviet era Latvian ER2T diesel unit, with the engine inboard so the trailing cars were quiet. Being a Soviet gauge train, the carriages are wider, making them very comfortable.

I saw some signs of work on Rail Baltica, particularly at Riga Airport. But generally in Riga the work seemed to have stopped and funding seems to have been a major issue, with the project running over budget. Shades of HS2 perhaps?

Overall, Latvia is a great country to visit. People are very friendly and helpful, while the trains are cheap and often electric. Some journeys are, however, very slow and infrequent. Not much for the UK to learn.

The visit demonstrated the obvious point that rail needs long-term continuous investment to work. The military threat from Russia will hopefully result in the work on Rail Baltica speeding up.

Richard's article appeared in *Rail Wales* issue 79 in autumn 2025.

www.railfuturewales.org.uk

2026 update: After delivering 32 16Ev electric units to Latvia, Skoda has won an order to supply nine battery electric trains to replace diesel trains. The deal has been helped by European Union funding and will see the two-car trains with space for eight cycles being delivered in 2029. They will serve Daugavpils and Cēsis, where new charging infrastructure will be constructed. Charging will be possible via overhead lines or at dedicated charging stations. More trains are expected to be ordered to allow replacement of diesel trains to Rezekne and Valmiera.

Please remember Railfuture in your will: www.railfuture.org.uk/legacies



Picture: SKODA

Skoda's first 16Ev units went into service in December 2023 with the Latvian national carrier Vienā vilcienā (VIVI), which translates into English as One Train.

Rail Baltica raises the standard in Riga

Rail Baltica aims to link the European Union with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia by providing new standard-gauge rail links to update the wide Russian-gauge network left over from the Soviet era.

It depends on continuing funding from the European Union and the individual countries.

Rail Baltica construction in Estonia reached a "decisive milestone" at the end of 2025. Construction contracts were agreed, covering the entire 213-kilometre Estonian main line from Tallinn to the Estonian-Latvian border, with more than 100 kilometres of line already under active construction.

With approximately €1.1 billion finance secured, Estonia is preparing to move from large-scale civil works toward "system-level delivery".

The rolling stock depot to be built in Rae will enable the simultaneous servicing of up to six high-speed trains or 12 regional trains, and will bring all rolling stock maintenance functions into a single integrated whole.

In Latvia, the southern section of the Rail Baltica main line between Misa and the Lithuanian border is 45 kilometres long and divided into 11 construction permits. By the end of 2025, works were active in seven, covering more than 30 kilometres, where core construction and



Riga Central station under construction

Picture: Eiropas Dzelzceļa līnijas, Bererix.

railway embankment works are under way. At Riga Central station, construction accelerated following the approval of finance in spring 2025. Major works, including roofing, glazing, facade elements and engineering systems, are scheduled for completion by September 2026, with temporary commissioning planned by the end of the year.

In Lithuania, construction works are progressing on a 114-kilometre section between Kaunas and Panevėžys.

"This project is a strategic priority for Lithuania and the entire Baltic region," said Roderikas Žiobakas, deputy minister of transport and communications.

Bruce's mum gives her verdict on Railwatch

Railfuture media officer Bruce Williamson asked his mother Hilary Sutcliffe to give her opinion on Railwatch 186 from an "outsider's" point of view.

This is what she wrote:

Railwatch is the mouthpiece of Railfuture, a thoroughly good and meaty production containing opinions, news, analysis and researches of the rail industry. I enjoyed its general positive tone. It described the expansion of light rail in West Yorkshire, and in trams

elsewhere. It also suggested: "Rail could and should replace air travel". This fits with the detailed criticism of government policy on flying and airport expansion.

The article "Portrush to Bristol by train and ship" gave a very good description of the traveller's experience and was amusing. It should be read by the person who defined Belfast Grand Central Station as an integrated transport hub! It was tremendous to read of the

success and expansion of the Newcastle-Ashington line.

Of course, HS2 had to have a mention and a dramatic photo, and there are also reports from the regions. It is a very lively production.

One exciting event for me is the reopening of Portishead station, as I know that area well from the 1940s, when my mother took me regularly camping along that bit of coast.

Hilary Sutcliffe

Smiles all round (well almost)

Ambitious vision wins many friends

By Ray King, Ian Brown and Owen O'Neill

More than £1 billion will be available over the next four years to spend on Northern Powerhouse Rail, chancellor Rachel Reeves announced in January.

Up to £45 billion was also promised in stages to create a turn up and go railway to serve the north of England.

The chancellor was keen to point out that this is not just a transport project. People will benefit from faster commutes, better jobs, more homes and economic growth.

"That is why we are reversing years of chronic underinvestment in the north," she said.

Stage 1

The first phase "will prioritise electrification and upgrades east of the Pennines for delivery in the 2030s covering the Leeds-Bradford, Sheffield-Leeds, and Leeds-York corridors".

Much of this work is already under way, including some electrification which will be completed this year, as part of the Transpennine Route Upgrade. Added to the existing upgrade is an extension to a new Bradford station.

Development work will also continue on reopening the Leamside Line, a 21-mile route between Pelaw, Gateshead and Turndale, Co Durham, which was closed in 1964, although many promises to reopen the Leamside line have been broken before.

Stage 2

The chancellor also had an ambitious new Liverpool-Manchester route (via Manchester Airport and Warrington) to announce, which pleased Liverpool city region mayor Steve Rotherham and Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham who said: "Finally, we have a government with an ambitious vision for the north of England. Over the past decade, Manchester has become the UK's fastest growing city region."

Mayors will have to raise local funding to pay for parts of the scheme, with a Treasury-imposed cap of £45 billion, to avoid another



A GOOD REASON TO SMILE: News that Sheffield-Leeds will be electrified by as part of NPR cheers up, left to right, Barnsley cabinet member Councillor Paul Coddard, transport secretary Heidi Alexander, Penistone and Stocksbridge MP Marie Tidball, and Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham.

huge HS2 overspend. An underground station at Manchester Piccadilly could unlock valuable commercial opportunities which a surface option would not.

England's northern economy is growing, according to business analysts, but lacks modern rail infrastructure. NPR has the potential to solve that problem.

Stage 3

Electrification of the Sheffield-Manchester (Hope Valley) route is part of stage 3. In addition, after the completion of NPR, the government intends to build a Birmingham-Manchester line, although it is not reinstating the cancelled stretch of HS2.

Some have greeted the plans with understandable cynicism. Railfuture Yorkshire president Alan Whitehouse said: "Anyone who thinks a new railway is going to be built between Bradford and Huddersfield needs the sort of doctor I have just about managed

to avoid. The Bradford station plans will probably be watered down to a reworking of the existing Bradford Interchange station. However, it does look more likely now that the central section of the North TransPennine Route will be electrified. At the moment,

electrification is authorised only as far as Huddersfield (from the Manchester direction). If the central section is electrified, it would create an all-electric route from York and Newcastle to Manchester and Liverpool. This could be presented as a Northern

Northern Powerhouse Rail

Northern Powerhouse Rail is a catchphrase that was invented by Conservative Chancellor George Osborne, who is better known for imposing six years of austerity on Britain. Successive versions of NPR have been quietly shelved. Railfuture has campaigned to convince politicians of all parties that major rail infrastructure requires sustained funding. Unfortunately there is not currently cross-party support for either HS2 or Northern Powerhouse Rail.



NORTHERN POWERHOUSE: Manchester Piccadilly station with a freight train on the platforms (left of the roof of the station's terminus tracks) and on to the city.

st everywhere) in the North



Picture: SOUTH YORKSHIRE MCA

Leeds-Sheffield electrification

South Yorkshire mayor Oliver Coppard met secretary of state for transport Heidi Alexander in January to seal the deal on how the £45 billion NPR investment will be shared.

Expansion of the tram-train network in South Yorkshire will be explored as part of the joint development work on Sheffield station's capacity – with £7.5 million confirmed for feasibility studies into new routes.

Electrification and upgrades on Leeds-Sheffield routes is confirmed, as well as increasing capacity to four fast trains an hour. The number of trains at Sheffield station will be increased in stage one of NPR, enabling more direct services and longer trains to serve the region.

Improved cross-Pennine links between Sheffield and Manchester will be delivered in phase three.

Transport secretary Heidi Alexander said: "I have strengthened this government's clear and unwavering

commitment to Northern Powerhouse Rail by signing an agreement with Mayor Coppard on the next steps for transforming connectivity in South Yorkshire."

Mayor Coppard agreed: "Northern Powerhouse Rail is a massive commitment from the government to the future of South Yorkshire, finally giving us the prospect of better, faster, more reliable connections between here and our neighbours in Leeds and Manchester. We can also kickstart work on the further expansion of our tram network, and make real progress towards the development of Rotherham station.

"These are all big steps for all of us who use public transport across the North, particularly here, because South Yorkshire is at the very front of the queue when it comes to delivery."

Rotherham Council leader Chris Read said: "Rotherham's proposed Gateway station will sit right at the heart of investment plans for railways in the North."

Rotherham council leader Chris Read, South Yorkshire mayor Oliver Coppard, Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander, Barnsley councillor James Higginbottom and Minister Tom Hunt

Powerhouse Rail success, especially if there was electrification and upgrading of the existing Bradford-Halifax-Huddersfield route." On the negative side, Alan warns that only about 2.5% of the total cost was actually committed in the chancellor's statement. He added:

"There is absolutely nothing to prevent the scheme from being amended, curtailed or abandoned, either by her or by her successors." However, over £11 million of local transport funding has already been agreed for South Yorkshire to develop a new Rotherham Gateway

station, which spells an end to slow journeys to Leeds and will support the ambitious regeneration plans for the town. A reopened Masborough station and Sheffield-Leeds electrification look certain. Councillor Tom Hunt, leader of Sheffield City Council, said: "This is

great news for Sheffield. Being included in the first phase of the Northern Powerhouse Rail plans means the early stages of delivery will provide better, faster trains to Leeds and Manchester, upgrades to capacity at Sheffield station and an important commitment from government to work with us on our tram-train expansion."

NPR is the central plank of the government's *Northern Growth Strategy: Case for change* plan. In its foreword to the strategy, the government said: "The North has always been at the forefront of innovation and creativity, whether in the development of the first public steam railway and the first computer, or the region's immense creative, sporting and cultural impact. This plan will be tailored to capitalise on the strengths, talent and assets which exist in different parts of the region to unlock its full potential."

Greater Manchester is already one of the fastest-growing cyber, professional and creative centres in Europe. Leeds and West Yorkshire are concentrating on financial services, while South Yorkshire is specialising in defence and advanced manufacturing. Liverpool city region is targeting life sciences, while Newcastle and the North East are building clean energy infrastructure for the future.

Reactions to NPR: Page 14



Picture: NETWORK RAIL

Manchester Vision for a rail future

The government's new policy on Northern Powerhouse Rail fits into Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham's *Vision for Rail* launched earlier.

Both plans put Greater Manchester at the forefront of rail reform and devolution.

Mayor Burnham's *On the Right Track for Growth – A 2050 vision for the future of rail in Greater Manchester* aims to double passenger journeys and unlock £90 billion in economic growth.

The *Vision* was unveiled at the Public Transport in the North of England conference in Manchester on 3 December.

The publication comes a year before the first local rail services join the Bee Network, which mayor Burnham hopes will emulate London's public transport success. One of Manchester's big rail

congestion problems has included the Castlefield Corridor, where overcrowded – and elevated – through tracks connect with the terminal platforms at Manchester Piccadilly station.

The *Visionary* answer to that is a new underground station which will also accommodate the new Liverpool-Manchester line via Manchester Airport.

Earlier suggested solutions have been a new Castlefield viaduct, but the underground option is expected to free up a large amount of land for development.

Greater Manchester's rail network covers over 318 km, across 96 stations.

Existing problems, including inaccessible stations, crowded services, reliability and fares can now be addressed.

Train going through the high-level congested Castlefield Corridor

Go-slow on Birmingham-Manchester high speed

By Owen O'Neill and Steve Wright

The government is now talking about building a new rail line between Birmingham and Manchester, two years after then prime minister Rishi Sunak axed HS2's plan to link the two cities.

The current initiative is not reinstating the cancelled phase 2 of HS2 and will be developed only after Northern Powerhouse Rail is completed.

This is worrying because the West Coast main line between the cities is already full. The parallel M6 motorway is also heavily used and full at many times of the day.

There is speculation that the price tag for HS2 from London to Birmingham could be more than £60 billion, or even as much as £80 billion (in 2033 money).

There are wider benefits, however, before the HS2 London-Birmingham line opens. Look at Birmingham city centre and the regular high rise tower block planning applications being made for locations within walking distance of the new station.

The benefits of the farebox do not start flowing though until HS2

trains start running. Once London-Birmingham is open, every year that the capacity is not maximised is lost potential benefit as the asset depreciates, possibly at a rate of £800 million a year.

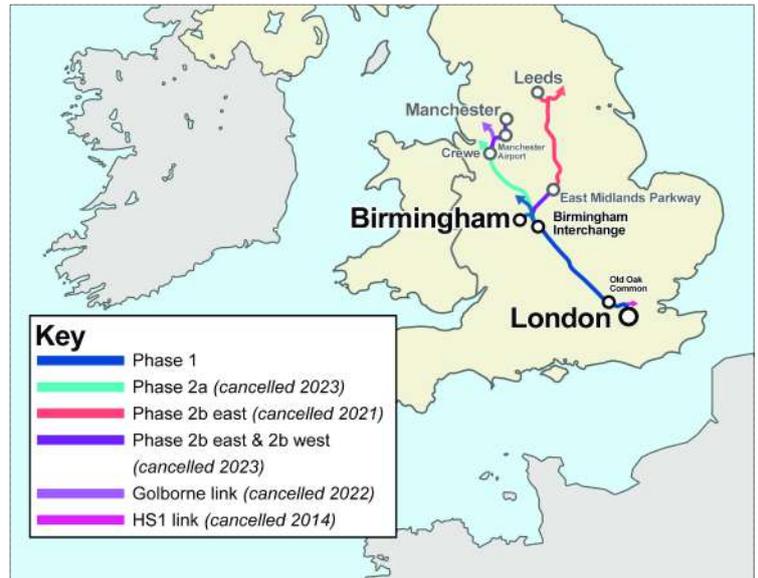
Any short-term capital savings from deferring spending on building Birmingham-Manchester will be offset by the depreciation of the HS2 London-Birmingham assets.

Even if work on Birmingham-Manchester is completed in the 2040s, there will be a decade of HS2 London-Birmingham depreciation and lost benefits.

One positive factor is that the government's existing land holdings between the West Midlands and Crewe will be retained. But sitting on the land for 20 years will undoubtedly attract adverse public comment.

If the full Y-plan of HS2 had been built as scheduled, the stem of the Y (London-Birmingham) would have been used intensively as the "assets were sweated", but as each northern limb has been amputated, use of the trunk will inevitably be reduced.

The government's current approach is to launch a feasibility study, "working with local partners on



Map: Cnrb (Creative Commons)

WISHFUL THINKING? A previous government's Y-shaped HS2 plan

what will be delivered, when and to what specifications". The feasibility study can be taken as the first step of a very complicated game of snakes and ladders to arrive at a project acceptable to all.

Let us hope that campaigners and planners who want an efficient and financially viable railway for the future do not have to miss three

throws of the dice. The traditional Treasury approach could be a bear trap which prevents a sensible use of assets which will be depreciating fast with every delay in getting "spades in the ground".

■ Owen O'Neill is Railfuture's director responsible for freight and logistics, while Steve Wright is chair of Railfuture West Midlands

NPR: What's good, what's bad and what's missing?

By Nina Smith

Railfuture Yorkshire has welcomed government plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail, but is critical of some missed opportunities. It is good that Yorkshire is to be prioritised in the first phase, with the electrification of Sheffield-Leeds and Leeds-Bradford.

However, the omission from electrification of Sheffield-Doncaster and Bradford-Halifax-Manchester (the Calder Valley line) is a serious flaw.

It is also disappointing that electrification of the Sheffield-Manchester (Hope Valley) route is not scheduled until phase three.

Railfuture welcomes progress towards new stations in Bradford and Rotherham, and capacity

improvements at Sheffield, Leeds and York. However, there is no mention of addressing the county's other major capacity bottleneck at Doncaster.

We hope that improvements at York will restore the delayed plan for an extra track to Skelton Junction, which would reduce conflict between York-Harrogate and East Coast main line services.

The other major omissions are:

- No proposals for a tunnelled connection between Victoria and Piccadilly stations in Manchester, enhancing connectivity from Bradford, Calderdale, Rochdale and east Lancashire.

- No mention of electrification from Micklefield to Selby and Hull.

- No mention of tackling the capacity problems between York

and Darlington that limit the number of TransPennine Express services, meaning there are no direct trains between Thirsk and Darlington, Durham and Newcastle.

- No mention of the long overdue reopening of the line between Skipton and Colne, important for freight, and for enabling easy access to employment and education in Skipton, Bradford and Leeds for people living in the deprived Pendle borough.

- No mention of reopening the short Crigglesstone curve to provide a direct route from Bradford and Halifax to Sheffield.

Railfuture Yorkshire is also worried about timescales and funding.

Timescales: There must be a general election by 2029. If this

results in a change of government, there is a danger that some aspects of this plan could be cancelled.

It is therefore vital that the £1.1 billion of committed funding during this Parliament is spent in a way that enables the project to be started no later than 2028.

Funding: Funding of up to £45 billion was announced (but only £1.1 billion is committed during this Parliament). Even so, £45 billion over 15-20 years (£3 billion a year) is inadequate to tackle the serious issues arising from historical underinvestment. There are many urgently needed projects and enhancements missing. A much more ambitious plan is needed.

■ Nina Smith is chair of Railfuture Yorkshire

NPR: Cautious welcome from Railfuture North West

By Trevor Bishop

Railfuture North West welcomes the government's announcement of plans for major upgrades and new rail lines and is pleased that there is at last a plan of implementation, albeit in phases.

Important elements are still missing, and we have questions on how present-day congestion is to be addressed, given that the earliest dates for any of these enhancements to be in operation are the early 2030s. The proposed new Liverpool-Manchester line is

the main focus of the second phase, with the preferred route being via Warrington Bank Quay and Manchester Airport. However the question of how an underground station at Manchester Piccadilly would fit in to this is subject to "detailed discussion" between the government and Transport for Greater Manchester.

The announcement on this NPR scheme was delayed for some time, having been initially trailed in September last year. There was speculation that it was because

costs of an underground station at Piccadilly would be higher, so it needed further review to make a sound business case. It is surprising, therefore, to see there still is not much detail. Railfuture is worried that there is still no costed plan.

On the plus side, Railfuture North West thinks this should be an opportunity to integrate Liverpool Lime Street bound local services into the Merseyrail network via a reopened Wapping tunnel into Liverpool Central and beyond (with a new grade-separated junction).

This would relieve capacity at Lime Street sufficiently to fit in these new additional NPR services. There would also be capacity for more frequent services on existing Liverpool-Manchester routes.

There is an added benefit of rebalancing the south end of the Merseyrail "Northern Line" network. Currently, two out of three services from the north have to reverse at Liverpool Central.

■ Trevor Bishop is chairman of Railfuture North West

Rail freight's hydrogen opportunity

By Peter Wakefield

Tests are under way to ensure that the railway is ready to transport hydrogen, as the “low carbon” fuel gradually becomes more important to Britain's economy.

Hydrogen could also be used to power trains on lines where traditional electrification may not be possible.

In December, Freightliner broke new ground by hauling the first shipment of hydrogen from Doncaster to High Marnham.

High Marnham is the Nottinghamshire site of a former coal-fired power station which closed in 2003.

The site, now known as HyMarnham Power, is part of a £50 million project to make it a significant site for production and storage, as well as the transportation of hydrogen.

Its cooling towers may have been demolished in 2012 and it may no longer have furnaces and boilers, but it does have electricity transmission lines connected to the national grid, a very large electricity sub station and the water from the River Trent.

HyMarnham is backed by the government to help meet Britain's net-zero ambitions and is a partnership between technology specialist GeoPura and waste company J G Pears, which processes animal by-products and food waste.

HyMarnham already has electrolyser capacity to produce enough hydrogen to create 15 megawatts of electricity, enough to provide power for 30,000 homes. Most of the hydrogen will be used by industry not in homes, but as well as providing off-grid, temporary power to replace diesel generators. Hydrogen production began there in 2024 and commercial operation is expected to start soon.

Water is split into hydrogen and oxygen using renewable electricity from on-site solar arrays and potentially from the existing J G Pears biomass plant.

The rail connection could be critical. In 2009, the railway that used to supply coal to the power station became a Network Rail test track – with continuously welded rail on concrete sleepers.

The line to High Marnham runs from Shirebrook junction on the Nottingham-Worksop Robin Hood line, through the former coalmining country of Edwinstowe and Ollerton, and across the East Coast main line at Tuxford.

The hydrogen at HyMarnham is compressed and currently transported by lorry, although a 140 kilometre pipeline is also planned. However, the railway has the potential to be a “rolling



TEST TRACKS SHOW OF POWER: Freightliner's December train to High Marnham consisted of a Stadler-built trimode locomotive (electric, diesel and battery) owned by Rail Operations Group, with three reinforced containers capable of carrying hydrogen, with a class 66 diesel locomotive at the rear of the train



Germany tries to solve hydrogen problems

Deutsche Bahn started using hydrogen-powered passenger trains, including the Alstom Coradia iLint, in Hesse and Lower Saxony in 2022 but has reverted to diesel operations on occasions “to ensure reliability”. There are also questions about its economic viability.

DB has also tried to solve the problem of not having enough suitable containers for transporting hydrogen on freight trains. It is developing multi-element containers, supported by government funding. A demonstrator unit was showcased at the transport logistic trade fair in Munich in June last year.

There has also been speculation that DB would like to replace at least some of its 1,300 diesels with hydrogen locomotives by 2050.

Also in 2022, it was suggested that hydrogen-powered trains could be used on Scotland's Far North line and the Cambrian line in Wales as a way of decarbonising rail.

Critics have pointed out many problems, some of which have been aired in previous editions of Railwatch. They say using hydrogen to fuel trains is only 35% efficient at best, compared to over 80% for taking power from overhead lines. It is also increasingly accepted that energy is precious and that we cannot afford to waste two thirds of it using an inefficient way of powering trains.

pipeline” for hydrogen. Network Rail believes it can prove that flexible rail operations are more efficient than a traditional pipeline.

Network Rail said: “This breakthrough marks a major step towards the rail network becoming a ready-made hydrogen distribution system, a rolling pipeline, with connections to all major industrial

and urban centres across Britain – proving the practical capability of rail to transport hydrogen at scale. “Hydrogen will also be utilised to decarbonise wider rail operations, from construction to ongoing maintenance and off-grid operations.”

GeoPura's Andrew Cunningham agreed: “Hydrogen has a vital role

in removing diesel from Britain's rail network, providing zero-emission power where electrification alone cannot reach.

“Excitingly, we are also showing that the rail network is a great way of transporting clean fuel to connected customers who cannot get the power they need from the traditional distribution grid.

“GeoPura is delighted to support Network Rail and its partners as they show what the future of a net-zero railway looks like in practice.”

Leevan Finney, Network Rail's engineering services director, said: “For 200 years the railway has connected communities and major industry across Britain. Today, the railway has the potential to be a strategic hydrogen distribution network in the future, as it has been for energy for many years.”

The days of coal mining in Nottinghamshire have left a good legacy with its extensive network of railways.

Freight trains from HyMarnham can go north to Worksop, Sheffield, Leeds, Manchester, Doncaster, Hull, Teesside, Newcastle and Scotland, and also south via Mansfield to every other part of the country.

Let us hope Network Rail and its partners can use this ever-changing corner of our former industrial heartland to create a flexible network of freight train services. There are also aspirations to resume a passenger train service from Nottingham and Mansfield to Ollerton via Edwinstowe.

Another power station – West Burton – which ceased burning coal in 2023 is also to be repurposed for energy uses.

■ Peter Wakefield is a vice-chairman of Railfuture East Anglia and a member of Railfuture's freight group.

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Liverpool Baltic station delayed

There is a significant delay to work starting on Merseyrail's new £100 million Baltic station in Liverpool. The Northern line station (to be built between Brunswick and Liverpool Central on the site of the former St James station) will serve the growing number of creative and hospitality businesses in the area.

Work was meant to start last year, but the planned 2027 opening may be delayed until 2029 as Liverpool City Region Combined Authority has not yet appointed contractors.

Metrolink for Stockport

Transport for Greater Manchester is working with Stockport Council to use tram-trains to connect Ashton to Manchester Airport via Stockport town centre. The key is developing the "underused" heavy rail line from Denton. The first step of extending Metrolink from its current East Didsbury terminus to Stockport town centre would enable further expansion – and promote economic growth.

Navendu Mishra, MP for Stockport, said: "This will be a significant boost for Stockport's connectivity and local economy." Tameside Council leader Eleanor Wills said: "Using the Denton rail line to expand Metrolink and better connect Ashton to Manchester Airport via Stockport has the potential to be truly transformational."

Metrolink is already the UK's largest light rail network, with 99 stops.

Lifts for Hindley station

Work started in February on making Wigan's Hindley station step-free with a £6.5 million investment plan which includes new lifts. It is part of a rolling programme to double the number of accessible stations in Greater Manchester.

New look for Salford Central

A £10 million upgrade to make Salford Central station (which featured in *Railwatch* 172 four years ago) more accessible was completed in November. The works at Salford's largest railway station included a new roof on the upper level of the building and improvements to the platforms and ramps.

OPSTA's 2026 campaign aims

The Ormskirk Preston Southport Travellers' Association has launched its 2026 campaign aims, and they are centred around getting improvements for passengers on the three Northern-operated railway lines in the area, namely Preston to Ormskirk, Southport to Manchester and Headbolt Lane (Kirkby) to Manchester.

The two termini on the Preston to Ormskirk line both have university campuses nearby (the University of Central Lancashire in Preston and



Picture: TRANSPORT for GREATER MANCHESTER

Yellow future for Manchester

A special yellow train appeared in Manchester in December 2025, as a prelude to local trains joining the Bee network one year later – in December this year.

Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham has outlined a step-by-step plan for bringing the city region's rail lines into the Bee network to create the first integrated public transport system outside London.

The first two lines – connecting Manchester to Glossop and Stalybridge – will join the Bee network in December when contactless "tap in, tap out" ticketing is introduced at 17 stations.

More lines will become part of the network in the two years after December 2026 when new simpler fares come in. From May 2026,

TransPennine Express will run night-time trains to Manchester airport, supporting the city's thriving night-time and visitor economy.

Step-free access schemes at Bryn station in Wigan will be followed by work at Hindley, Reddish North and Swinton.

Greater Manchester will also pilot a new approach to transport-led regeneration around local rail stations, starting with Ashton and Stalybridge.

Mr Burnham said: "We are on the cusp of delivering a fully integrated, world-class transport system for our global city-region."

Northern's Tricia Williams said: "We have a shared vision of delivering a reliable and inclusive railway that meets the needs of everyone in the region, opens up a range of new opportunities and supports economic growth."

Greater Manchester's rail network covers over 318 kilometres over rail, across 96 stations and delivers over 40 million passenger trips into Manchester's central stations.

■ The class 323 electric unit was built in the early 1990s. The 43 trains in the class were the last to enter service with British Rail before privatisation. The trains are now owned by Porterbrook, a rolling stock company (ROSCO) created as the time of privatisation.



Edge Hill University in Ormskirk). OPSTA's passenger counts have consistently shown that there is a substantial additional flow of students from Monday to Friday. So with just one train an hour, reliability is an important factor, and unfortunately experience shows cancellations are all too common. As one student pointed out, every lecture missed represents a loss of £75 (paid as part of their university fees). OPSTA's campaign aims are to get Northern to improve reliability.

It also plans to press for a Sunday service because it says this area of south west Lancashire is a public transport desert on a Sunday. OPSTA is also looking to get Midge Hall station on the Preston-Ormskirk line reopened. The former station is surrounded by growing housing developments, and employment opportunities in the west Leyland area are also looking promising. With all trains having to stop at the Midge Hall crossing signal box anyway, it is

thought the 30 extra seconds needed could be accommodated within the hourly schedule. In the short term, OPSTA thinks it would be better to remove the buffers at Ormskirk, which would allow Merseyrail battery-powered class 777 trains to proceed to Burscough, two miles further north, where there is substantial house building.

The battery trains could eventually be extended a further 13 miles to Preston, opening a through route with onward connections. Reopening the southern Burscough Curve at the same time would give a large population further options for travel to and from Southport, Preston and Liverpool.

OPSTA would also like to see the Headbolt Lane (Kirkby) to Wigan section of the route, which is something of a Cinderella service with a short day and six-day only timetable, brought into the Merseyrail network, again using the battery class 777 trains.

The Southport to Manchester Victoria line (via Wigan and Salford) has a large catchment area at the Manchester end and runs through sizeable dormitory towns in Lancashire. At the moment its service is dire. Cancellations because of breakdowns are common, as services are operated by a mix of the most unreliable class 769 trimodes (former Thameslink trains) or class 150 diesels (which date back to the 1980s). OPSTA is pleased that Northern is planning to procure new rolling stock, but that is some time away and OPSTA wants Northern to bring in alternative trains to replace the failed class 769s completely in the short term. OPSTA thinks some simple timetable changes in May would improve the Manchester Victoria service and reduce demands on the diesel fleet. Passengers have told OPSTA they are impatient for a through service to the south side of Manchester beyond the present Manchester Oxford Road. OPSTA wants Network Rail to remodel the layout at Oxford Road (part of the Castlefield corridor) so it does not constrain any future enhancements of through services.

OPSTA is also concerned by the lack of any agreement with rail unions on seven-day working. It believes an agreement on seven-day working should be treated as a priority. At present, the service only runs every two hours on Sundays and is often affected by cancellations. A four-hour wait for a train is completely unacceptable. It is preventing people from getting to work, and businesses in Southport are suffering because of the inadequate service.

www.railfuture.org.uk/North+West+Branch

Brave Terry inspired rail campaigners

By Roger Bacon

It was very sad news for members of Railfuture East Midlands to learn that colleague and friend Terry Holt passed away, aged 82, after a short illness in early December.

I first met Terry at Railfuture meetings in Leicester in the late 1990s and at that time he was very interested in reopening closed railway stations on the Midland main line, such as Kegworth.

He was seeking to reverse the Beeching cuts long before it became fashionable to do so. As a Rushcliffe borough councillor over many years he developed his proposals, which eventually led to the building of East Midlands Parkway station.

It is heartening to see photographs of him standing in a field next to the line and then years later in 2012 at the opening of the new four-platform main line station.

I persuaded Terry to become Railfuture East Midlands chair in 2006 and we were both involved in lobbying for upgrades at Loughborough station, where 93 main line trains stopped each day but were all too long for the short



Terry Holt CEng IMechE

platforms. Added to that was very limited car parking adjacent to many acres of buddleias growing on redundant sidings, an open stepped footbridge which was a challenge especially at night when IC125 trains passed below at 110mph, and access to two platforms for less able passengers requiring help from station and signalling staff over a barrow crossing. After discussions with the local MP, we were invited to meet transport secretary Geoff Hoon in

London in 2009. Mr Hoon had to cancel our appointment at short notice to announce in Parliament the signing of the £7.5 billion Hitachi trains contract for the Great Western and East Coast main lines.

We had already arrived at the Department for Transport, after Terry had to crawl on his hands and knees into a taxi at St Pancras as his mobility scooter would not fit.

Forever determined, we eventually met rail minister Paul Clark later that day and made our pitch to him and his staff, which was not on their planned meeting agenda.

After more lobbying, and with Network Rail now on board, Loughborough station underwent a major £8 million upgrade that met all our requests and was officially completed in May 2012.

As Terry was a long-term wheelchair user, he continued to push for better access for disabled users. He considered the portable ramps inadequate and the gap between platform height and train steps incomprehensible, even more so on new stations such as St Pancras International and East Midlands Parkway. As a chartered engineer

he proposed a better solution: mobile trolley hydraulic lifts as used successfully in Switzerland and France. These provide level access, reducing the risks associated with sloping ramps.

Only a couple of weeks before he died, Terry was at Derby station helping the East Midlands Railway disability panel assess disabled passengers' access on to the new Aurora trains prior to them entering service.

Despite many years of diligent, patient and informed lobbying, including a number of false dawns, the full electrification of the main line, a few more miles into Leicester and then to Nottingham, Derby and Sheffield, eluded him.

Nevertheless, Railfuture East Midlands is committed to carrying on Terry's good work until the East Midlands region gets the funding for the full electrified low carbon main line railway it deserves.

A packed service to remember Terry was held on 27 January at Soar parish church, and afterwards at the local Plough Inn where we all raised a glass to him.

West Midlands

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West Midlands rail conference

The 2026 West Midlands rail conference took place in Birmingham on 3 March, bringing together the West Midlands Rail Executive, Network Rail and passenger and freight operators, including DfT Operator Limited, the government's public sector rail owning group. Railfuture was represented by several members of the West Midlands committee.

Camp Hill line celebrations

At last! The Camp Hill line in south Birmingham will have a regular local passenger service again in just a few weeks time. It closed in the 1940s and it has taken years of campaigning to get it reopened, mainly thanks to previous West Midlands mayor Andy Street's support for railway projects. Driver training is taking place now and access approaches to the stations are 99% complete.

The main suburbs this line will serve, Moseley and Kings Heath, have suffered from serious traffic congestion for years, making the bus journey to the city centre unreliable. It is expected that journey times will tumble from 30+ minutes to 10-12. A third station, Pineapple Road, will offer a direct service to the city centre that has not existed since the 1940s. By changing at Kings Norton on to the Cross-City line, passengers will also have easier and quicker access to Longbridge for the local campus of South and City College and for the shopping village, and also to Birmingham University and Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

Initially there will be just two trains per hour, using New Street station, but under the Midlands Rail Hub project Moor Street station will become the city destination and there should be at least four trains per hour. Two other

new stations will be opening soon, at Willenhall and Darlaston, with an hourly service to both Wolverhampton and Birmingham. Willenhall last saw a passenger service in 1965 that ran between Walsall and Wolverhampton, so the choice of Birmingham as one of the destinations is a bonus. Darlaston station is a new venture. Westbound trains will go on to stations to Telford and Shrewsbury.

12 million passengers use Cross-City line

Train operator West Midlands Railway carried more than 12 million passengers on its Cross-City line in the first year of full operation with its new three-car class 730/0 electric trains. Surveys show a 19% increase in customer satisfaction, thanks to the trains' spacious interiors and contemporary design.

The 32-mile Cross-City line (from Redditch and Bromsgrove to Sutton Coldfield and Lichfield) is said to be the busiest local route outside London. The three-car electric trains also provide services between Birmingham and Walsall, Rugeley and Wolverhampton. Their five-car cousins (730/2) are now providing most local services to and from London Euston and longer distance services from London to Birmingham via Northampton and Crewe via the Trent Valley.

Midlands Rail Hub alliance

Railfuture is hoping that an alliance set up in December will succeed in designing and developing the ambitious Midlands Rail Hub, a project which includes reopening platform 4 at Snow Hill station so additional Chiltern Railways services can run directly between Birmingham's business district and London Marylebone.

The alliance of VolkerRail, Laing O'Rourke, Atkins Realis and Siemens Mobility will work with Network Rail and the West Midlands Rail Executive. Rail minister Lord Peter Hendy

predicted: "The Midlands Rail Hub will be transformational for millions of people across the country by improving capacity across the network, allowing more services and better reliability. Thanks to £123 million of government funding we are unlocking jobs opportunities, stimulating housing growth and better connecting our communities, forging ahead with our promise to create the modern transport Britain needs and deserves."

Birmingham International 50th anniversary

Train operator Avanti celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Birmingham International station in January. Built to serve Birmingham Airport and the National Exhibition Centre, it is also now a commuter hub for the Solihull area. More than 300 trains, including those of CrossCountry and Transport for Wales, call at the station each day.

Exit West Midlands Trains. Enter WM Trains

West Midlands Trains, operating as London Northwestern Railway and West Midlands Railway, transferred into public ownership in February. Operations are now run by a new public sector operator – WM Trains Limited – a subsidiary of public corporation DfT Operator Limited.

Coventry backs Very Light Rail service

Railfuture, which backs light rail projects, is delighted to see that Coventry is planning to install 800 metres of pre-fabricated track for a Very Light Rail service, starting next year from the rail station to the University Technology Park. The city council, which owns the intellectual property rights for VLR, aims to demonstrate that it can be delivered for £16 million per mile, compared to the £245 million cost of one Midland Metro extension.

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East West Rail complication

Recent announcements from East West Railway Company reveal significant changes to the project following further consultation. Some progress is welcomed, but the overall picture remains complex, contentious and, for many

Paul Hollinghurst

stakeholders, unacceptably slow given the scale of growth the railway is meant to support.

In Cambridge, long-standing plans for an eastern entrance to Cambridge station are finally being progressed, with a new footbridge linking Clifton Road to platforms 7/8 and across to platform 2. Local politicians are pressing for this scheme to be detached from the wider EWR programme and delivered urgently, reflecting frustration with prolonged delays elsewhere.

Proposals for Cambridge East station are far more controversial. Despite earlier suggestions that EWR services might extend along the Newmarket line, the current preferred station location lies on the south-west corner of the former airport site, remote from existing communities and employment. Many local residents and rail groups argue instead for a station at Yarrow Road, closer to established housing, jobs and future development, alongside restoration of double track to Newmarket as the logical eastern terminus.

West of Cambridge, relocation of the proposed Cambourne station is a rare success, with agreement on a more suitable site to serve what is planned to become a settlement of up to 100,000 residents.

In contrast, the continued absence of a station at St Neots has emerged as one of the most serious weaknesses in the current plans. The new railway will pass between the town and the A428/A421 corridors, close to the 4,000-home Wintringham development, yet the EWR company has rejected a station there on journey time grounds. This is despite strong backing from local authorities, the combined authority and consultation respondents, and despite the negligible impact an additional stop would have on an electrified railway. Proposals instead rely

Picture: GREATER ANGLIA



Pupils from Boxted Primary School, Colchester, are just some of the 500 who have been learning about the rail history of East Anglia in a project backed by train operator Greater Anglia. Peter Bruff: The Forgotten Engineer was live-streamed to schools, from Chappel and Wakes Colne station at the East Anglian Railway Museum. Bruff was responsible for many projects, including building the spectacular 1849 Chappel viaduct, Clacton's pier and other key infrastructure works across Essex and Suffolk

on poorly defined "active travel" links to Tempsford, several kilometres away, a solution widely seen as unrealistic and likely to increase car dependency. While a future station has not been ruled out, critics argue the case already exists and should be acted upon now.

Tempsford itself is set to become a major new town, with a significant interchange station between East West Rail and the East Coast main line. Bedford will become a key regional hub, while Bedford St Johns will be relocated closer to the hospital. On the Marston Vale line, EWR proposes consolidating stations into four upgraded hubs, a move broadly supported, particularly given the expected demand from the proposed Universal Studios theme park near Stewartby.

Overall, the dominant concern remains pace. With the development consent order still some way off, construction may not begin until the late 2020s and completion could slip into the mid-2030s. Businesses, local authorities and industry groups argue that such delays threaten

investment, growth and connectivity across the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, and are increasingly vocal in their call to "just get on with it."

Colchester Transport East conference

Future of Rail in the East was the title of a conference in Colchester in November, organised by Transport East, the regional transport authority for Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. Transport East described the event as focusing on collaboration to shape a future-ready rail network that supports economic growth, serves a growing population, and informs the ambitions of the incoming mayors for both Norfolk and Suffolk as well as Greater Essex. Insights from the day are intended to help the new mayors champion the region's rail priorities from the outset. Railfuture East Anglia attended the conference. Delegates were given opportunities to contribute but it remains unclear where these discussions will lead.

The *Future of Rail in the East* overview reiterated the importance of rail but offered little clarity on its long-term vision, beyond limited service improvements such as an additional stopping train between Clacton and Colchester. Several questions regarding improved rail links to Stansted Airport, including a potential eastward connection via Braintree, were met with disappointing responses that relied on outdated studies favouring bus-based solutions. The day concluded with a strong keynote address from Colchester MP Pam Cox, who twice called for a fast rail link from east Essex via Stansted Airport to Cambridge and East West Rail – an ambition that deserves the close attention of the new mayors.

Access for All bridges

Biggleswade on the East Coast main line and Stowmarket on the Great Eastern – both market towns with wide catchments – have recently benefitted from Access for All funding to replace outdated footbridges with modern structures incorporating lifts. Installation is complete at Biggleswade with the new facility up and running, while work to finalise lift systems continues at Stowmarket. The fact remains that too many stations across the network continue to pose real access difficulties for many potential travellers.

www.railfuture.org.uk/
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Sevenside

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Bruce Williamson

Link to Oxford

Great Western Railway has applied to the Office of Rail and Road for approval for a regular service between Bristol and Oxford, building on its winter Saturdays-only trips. Presumably the Department for Transport has approved already. Local authorities and the regional England's Economic Heartland are keen. But with cancellation rates at most Sevenside stations running at 5-10%, it could spread GWR trains and crews too thinly.

Fatal accident on level crossing

In October, a boy of 17 was killed on a pedestrian level crossing on the main Bristol-Exeter line near Taunton. Since then, the incident has been followed up by the BBC, and his family have set up a petition for a safer crossing on change.org. Their local MP has also got involved, calling for a subway or bridge. Nationally there are thousands of these crossings. What is the best practical way to make them safe?

Pilning poser

Despite reinstating platform lighting at Pilning after 40-odd years, during which trains have been able to call only in daylight, Great Western Railway has refused Pilning Station Group's request to retime the current last train (the 1532) to enable people to have a

full day out. It seems bizarre to spend money on installing new lighting then refuse to let passengers benefit from it! The group continues to press for this and other improvements to the station's skeleton service – currently just two trains a week on Saturdays, in one direction only since the footbridge was controversially demolished in 2016. Website: www.pilningstation.uk

Branch business

Railfuture volunteers have been taking care of routine business over the past few months. We replied to a consultation by the West of England combined authority about improving the A4 between Bristol and Bath for cycles and pedestrians. We emphasised that easy access to stations should be a priority,

including to the site of a possible future station at Saltford. We also registered with GWR as one of their stakeholders and completed a long questionnaire about current train operations.

We argued for more reliable services, with enough seats, cycle and wheelchair space, and for all stations and trains to offer Access for All.

Railfuture needs you!

Sevenside branch is looking for Railfuture members to join our team. We would especially like to hear from people who are good at working with other members, can take a regional view of transport issues, or are good with social media. Call or message Bruce on 07759 557389, or email sevenside@railfuture.org.uk

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Floods hit rail services

North Devon line trains, swamped with peak-time passengers in normal times, were overwhelmed by floods in November – and the line closed for almost a week as a precaution. January saw further disruption to road and rail after more extensive flooding. In February, the line was shut again for three weeks. Okehampton and Newquay were also hit.

Such incidents highlighted the need for investment in capacity and resilience. Tim Steer, Railfuture Devon and Cornwall chair, liaised with Network Rail and Great Western Railway as their unofficial point of independent contact to provide the best possible information via social media about rapidly changing and uncertain situations. He was also busy supplying various media outlets with information.

The next extended line closure will be for nine days in March for engineering works. Railfuture welcomes the track renewal near Lapford, in the area of November's swollen rivers alerts. The area south of Barnstaple station is also included in the work

The new Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority becomes the transport authority from April. Railfuture has fed into its local transport plan for 2025-40. We called successfully for the modernisation and extension (to Bideford) of the North Devon line to be included in the plan.

The authority's corporate plan for 2025-35 includes support for upgrades to the Exeter-Barnstaple Tarka line as a priority.

Tarka line MP meets operator

North Devon MP Ian Roome met Great Western Railway's managing director Mark Hopwood in November, when the Tarka line was closed between Barnstaple and Crediton because of swollen rivers under three bridges. The MP has called for modernisation and more frequent, faster and dependable services on the line.

After November's prolonged disruption he launched a public



BUSY: A typical morning peak-period at Barnstaple where people are waiting for the train to Exeter Central. The evening return trains are equally popular

Picture: TIM STEER

Picture: DAVID WHITEWAY (GWR)



MP Ian Roome, left, met GWR's Mark Hopwood CBE as floods hit North Devon in November

Future-proof the Tarka Line petition. Tim Steer was asked to be pictured as one of the first signatories!

Bideford meeting postponed

Railfuture director Roger Blake was planning to present a discussion paper to a Torridge District Council's committee in January but the meeting had to be rescheduled. Roger, convener of the Railfuture-instigated Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, will now attend in April. The subject will be the preliminary strategic business case, including a specialist economic assessment and initial engineering feasibility, for a Bideford-Barnstaple rail link.

Cornwall bus initiative

Tim Steer has cooperated with Cornwall Council's bus survey and



Tim Steer, chair of Railfuture Devon and Cornwall, with his dog Ozzy at Bideford station

Picture: CLEARSKY PUBLISHING

stressed the need for improved links with rail stations such as Okehampton. Improvements are needed for Bude-Stratton, Holsworthy and Launceston.

Railfuture's Fighting Fund has supported affiliated member Connect Bude's resident surveys to support increased bus services, while Launceston Town Council is collaborating on similar projects.

Social media action

Tim Steer and Roger Blake have ensured that three Facebook pages are full of lively material.

Railfuture has secured publicity over 40 times recently with input to BBC Devon News, Plymouth Today, Exeter Today, DevonAir Radio, Molton Monthly Magazine, North Devon Journal, Rail Advent, Torbay Weekly, Crediton Courier, North Devon Gazette, North Devon Today, Radio Exe, Devon Live, Tiverton Mid-Devon Gazette, Western Morning News and The Moorlander.

Tim also appeared on BBC One Spotlight evening news and on New Year's Day Roger Blake was interviewed on BBC Radio Devon.

TavyRail joins Railfuture

TavyRail has been welcomed as a newly affiliated member of Railfuture. TavyRail aims to restore the rail link between Tavistock and



Plymouth via Bere Alston. Tavistock has been without a rail service for more than half a century, but reopening the line would benefit a contemporary community of around 13,000 people by linking them to Plymouth.

TavyRail chair Richard Searight told The Moorlander: "Congestion on routes into Plymouth is already affecting commuters.

"There is escalating transport need in Plymouth as the A386 faces ever increasing congestion – especially as the dockyard scales up to fulfill the expected £4 billion defence requirement.

Crucially, some people are having to go in an hour early just to get a parking space now before the scale up happens."

Devon County Council included the Tavistock rail proposal in its 2011 local plan and cooperated in preparing a strategic outline business case. It is hoped Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority will support business case development for reopening the Tavistock line.

The prospect of investment at Devonport naval base and a new station at Plympton help the case for a Plymouth Metro, which is supported by Rebecca Smith (South West Devon MP and member of the Commons transport committee) and Plymouth City Council leader Tudor Evans.

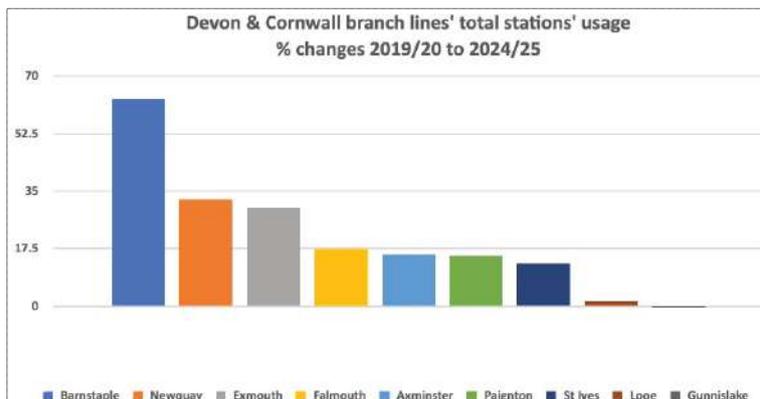
More Alliance members

Railfuture-backed Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance now has additional local council members – Holsworthy Town Council (on the former Okehampton-Bude route), Crediton Town Council, Down St Mary Parish Council, Morchard Bishop Parish Council and Mid-Devon District Council, which sponsored the alliance's convention in March.

Growing rail cheers campaign

Rail growth following the Covid pandemic is strong in Devon and Cornwall, as shown in December's figures published by the Office of Rail and Road. The outstanding explosion of patronage on the Tarka line to Barnstaple continues unabated, a tribute to the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership which celebrated its 35th anniversary this year and which was the country's first community rail partnership,

www.railfuture.org.uk/Devon+and+Cornwall+Branch



Graphic: RAILFUTURE

North East



Just over one year after it first opened, there was a small gathering at Blyth Bebside station to commemorate one million passengers being carried on the Northumberland Line. An amazing accomplishment as there were still two further stations to open at the time. Northumberland Park (junction with the Metro) opened on 22 February and Bedlington was expected to open in late March. The picture shows Dennis Fancett and South East Northumberland Rail User Group committee members Andrew Carmichael and Trevor Watson. Dennis said: "It also afforded a good chance to catch up with various people including Ian Lavery MP, Councillor Glen Sanderson, leader of Northumberland County Council, and various others from Northern and Nexus as well as council staff". SENRUG now wants to see four-coach trains to match demand. Northumberland County Council is pressing forward with applications for funding for extension to Woodhorn and Newbiggin. Railfuture wants bus connections to be improved and lower fares to help integrate with the Metro.

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Whitby Sundays

Railfuture and its allies have won improved services and connections at Middlesbrough for trips to Whitby and other stations on the Esk Valley line, particularly on a Sunday. Northern paid attention to complaints from the Tees Valley Line Rail User Group (formerly Saltburn Line Users' Group) and the Esk Valley Line community rail partnership about the loss of services, including to James Cook University Hospital in Middlesbrough, in the December timetable changes.

One southbound morning service and two northbound afternoon services are being restored on Sundays as through trains between Newcastle and Whitby when the timetables change in May, and Northern has committed to exploring more restorations later.

The widescale connection snapping was caused by the East Coast timetable changes in December which was blamed on accommodating new open-access services.

Leamside looms in a good way

Local television interviewed Railfuture North East's Ian Walker about government pledges to work towards reopening the Leamside line as part of its Northern Powerhouse Rail package, announced in January.



Peter Walker

The line from Pelaw (on the South Shields line) to Tursdale Junction, just north of Ferryhill on the East Coast main line, has the potential to be a relief route from Newcastle to York, although fittings trains into Metro frequencies might prove tricky.

Parts of it are already earmarked for a proposed extension of the Tyne and Wear Metro from Pelaw, via Washington, to South Hylton, the present outer terminus of the Sunderland branch.

Most of the Leamside track has, however, been lifted and, although the Metro extension may be "in the bag", the rest looks likely to be a long-term project, maybe stretching to the 2040s.

Examining the benefits of adding a flyover to the layout between Ferryhill and Tursdale Junction will be worthwhile, and the emergence of Great British Railways may be the best opportunity to improve rail layouts to minimise conflicting workings.

Lunch in the water tank?

The water tank is an unusual feature of Haltwhistle station on the Newcastle-Carlisle line. Now daily, except Tuesdays, you can have a midday snack or meal in what was once the water tower. This is one of many initiatives by the Tyne Valley community rail partnership to attract more people to use its train services.

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[X @RailfutureNEast](https://twitter.com/RailfutureNEast)

Thames Valley



RAIL CHAT: Railfuture's stand at Oxford Green Fair in November

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Green Fair

Railfuture Thames Valley had a busy day at the Oxford Green Fair in Oxford Town Hall in November. Two questions we were often asked were: When will the train service to Milton Keynes start, and when will the Cowley line open? Cowley could be open in 2029, but it is not clear when services to Milton Keynes will begin. It is always fascinating to talk to the public and hear about the issues on people's minds. The state of Oxford station crops up frequently. One visitor compared Oxford's rail service to that of Leiden, a similar size city and home of the Netherlands' oldest university which, he said, has a standard service of nine-car double deck trains every 10 minutes. Roll on OxRAIL2040.

See page 3: Turn up and go

In the news

BBC Oxfordshire & Berkshire, the Oxford Mail and the Maidenhead



Andrew McCallum

Advertiser welcomed contributions from Railfuture Thames Valley's media representative Dave Richardson. The Maidenhead Advertiser article started as a request for a quote on rail fares but expanded to cover the contrast between Oxfordshire with its county plan, and Berkshire with its separate unitary authorities and no long-term plan for rail investments. The reporter responded well and helped raise Railfuture's profile with the paper's readers.

Boom time

Use of Culham station was up by a staggering 57% over the past year and Radley by 45% in the latest figures from the Office of Rail and Road. Hanborough was up by 31%, Charlbury by 25% and Kingham by 29%.

Bristol link

Great Western Railway has submitted an application to run seven daily round-trip direct Oxford-Bristol inter-city trains from May this year.

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Doncaster hope

An MP has sought Railfuture help in restoring an hourly service between Doncaster and Scunthorpe. MP Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) was impressed by the knowledge and experience of Railfuture members in identifying the essentials for a good campaign. The success of Northumberland Line and Hope Valley campaigners was recognised, along with the experience of the North Notts and Lincolnshire community rail partnership. Campaigners warned Lee about the dangers of skip stopping, which creates passenger confusion. He has used this



David Pennie

information and local support to approach South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority and the new one in Greater Lincolnshire. The data is going to Northern and TransPennine Express to back pleas for restoring trains cut in 2021.

Northern on the fast track

Train operator Northern has started a new Leeds-Sheffield fast service. The 47-minute "Yorkshire Flyer" was officially launched at Leeds station in February and cuts some journey times by an hour. The service provides 30,000 extra seats a week and is aimed to support economic growth. It complements the hourly fast Leeds-Sheffield CrossCountry service.

www.railfuture.org.uk/Yorkshire+Branch

[Railfuture Yorkshire Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/3116771821782626/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/3116771821782626/)

Belper's campaign for a better train service

By Stephen Chaytow

For many years, Belper's main rail connection has been the hourly Derwent Valley line service, between Nottingham and Matlock.

Building on innovation in East Midlands Railway's new timetable, which extends this service to Lincoln and Cleethorpes, a recent survey at Belper will be used to identify further opportunities.

This survey came from last year's report to EMR, comparing footfall from Belper's hourly services with better patronage from more frequent services at Alfreton and Dronfield.

A central issue is Belper's lack of regular, direct connectivity northbound to Chesterfield and Sheffield.

Aside from an early morning service and two trains returning later in the day, travellers are encouraged to go south and change at Derby.

Journey destination data and anecdotal evidence suggest that the extra time and cost involved make this an unpopular option.

It was agreed with EMR that a survey might help to shed more light on the issue, in a more systematic manner.

A survey was devised by Friends of the Derwent Valley Line and hosted on the town's website by a supportive Belper Town Council in autumn 2025.

The number of respondents exceeded 1,000, or about 5% of Belper's 19,000 population. This well-supported survey was recently presented to EMR representatives, who expressed interest in

A great place to live but historic market town wants improved connections

Belper is recognised as part of the Derwent Valley Mills UNESCO World Heritage site, celebrated for its historic mills, striking architecture and strong sense of community.

Belper has been described as one of the best places to live in Derbyshire, with a good mix of local independent shops, cafes and restaurants, excellent schools and easy access to the Peak District national park. It is 12 minutes by train from Derby, 31 minutes to Leicester and one hour 40

minutes to London. For more than 100 years, Belper was a stop on the Midland Railway's main line from London St Pancras to Manchester.

This all changed when the main line was closed between Matlock and Buxton in 1967 along with Darley Dale, Rowsley, Bakewell and Miller's Dale stations. Belper lost its status and became an unstaffed station with a merely local service between Derby and Matlock. Connections gradually improved over the years.



Belper is proud of its good selection of independent shops

investigating further. The headline finding showed significant demand for a regular connection to Sheffield, with today's demand split between changing trains at Derby, travelling by car, or choosing an alternative point of origin for the journey, mostly Alfreton or Derby.

In addition, people would like more frequent services to Derby, the main journey destination. Evidence from elsewhere in the country shows the potential for significantly

increased usage where service frequency is improved.

Ongoing media coverage has described the challenge facing Belper's retail sector in this small Derbyshire market town. An injection of fresh local and visitor footfall through the station might help.

The Belper initiative came from a Network Rail report, published in 2024, highlighting opportunities for

improvements for six stations in the Derby area. This initiative shows that even when investment monies are tight, there can still be good opportunities for campaigners.

Since the work for Belper has been well received, the Friends will consider which of the other stations might be the next candidate for attention, possibly Willington, which is served by CrossCountry services.

Should EMR propose any changes, these would take time to introduce. However, the May 2026 timetable is to see the addition of an extra stop at Edale from Belper to Manchester via Sheffield.

This could encourage more walkers from the town out into the Peak District. Interest might be increased by the balancing return service from Sheffield to Belper, later on Sunday afternoon.

It is good to see Belper station, with its delightfully maintained gardens, receiving consideration about the future of its rail services too.

■ *Stephen Chaytow is chair of the Friends of the Derwent Valley Line and a Railfuture East Midlands committee member*

Picture: LOVE BELPER

Nightmare on Praed Street (Paddington)

By Bruce Williamson

I am sure I was not the only *Railwatch* reader caught up in travel chaos on 11 January at Paddington station.

I was returning from a weekend in Kent to my

home in Bristol. Arriving at the station at about 1830 I saw that all the departure boards were showing "cancelled" or "delayed". Not a good sign. The chaos had started at about 1800, when a fire at a recycling centre in Southall meant that the line had to be closed completely. The main station concourse was very busy, with a large number of people queuing to get help from the information desk. After a while, announcements advised passengers to a small number of specific destinations, including Exeter, to travel via Waterloo. No mention of Bristol. I was aware that Waterloo was an alternative possibility to get to Bristol, but less seasoned travellers wouldn't have known this. So the question for me was: do I hang on at Paddington, or divert via Waterloo? Was the delay likely to be minutes or hours? This

Blaze closes station

London's Paddington station was severely disrupted on Sunday 11 January 2026, when a large fire broke out amid 15 tonnes of mixed waste at a recycling centre near the Great Western main line at Southall. GW main line, Heathrow Express and Elizabeth Line services between Paddington and Reading were cancelled from about 1800 for at least two hours. Trains started running again after 2000 although there were severe delays until midnight.

last piece of information was missing, so I could not make that decision, and that was a failing of how the situation was managed on that day.

Just by chance, I was standing looking at my phone when a member of station staff approached me and asked where I was going. When I said Bristol, he told me to go to Waterloo. "Is it going to be a long one?" I asked. "Yeah". This was the information I needed. I took the Underground's Bakerloo line to Waterloo. There

are no direct trains from Waterloo to Bristol any more, so I had to enquire at the desk. I was advised to take the next train at platform 6 and change at Basingstoke.

In my mind I could not quite picture the railway map out of Waterloo, but the information was correct. Basingstoke is the junction between the South West main line and the West of England main line, which took me to Salisbury. I changed there for a train to Bristol Temple Meads, where it was too late for my final local train, so I had to walk. In the end I got home three hours late. I later got a full refund on my ticket.

It is worth adding that in my diverted journey, all the ticket barriers accepted my ticket and the ticket inspectors were sympathetic. Back at Paddington, some trains started running again from about 2000 but there was still major disruption up until midnight, and no doubt the few trains running would have been massively overcrowded.

So I made the right decision to go via Waterloo, but I wonder how many other people were left hanging around not knowing what to do.

■ *Bruce Williamson is Railfuture's media officer*

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There was some good news in the Scottish Budget in January, which included the reopening of a station at Winchburgh in West Lothian. Railfuture is disappointed that there are no similar proposals for the Tayside town of Newburgh. Both MP Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife), and Willie Rennie, MSP for North East Fife, have called for investment to support reopening Newburgh station. The vast majority of reopenings have taken place in Scotland's Central Belt, as have all the recent electrification projects. Surely it is time to spread the benefits of increased access to rail further away from Edinburgh and Glasgow? After last year's rebuff from Transport Scotland, the StARLink campaign is back in action fighting for a rail station in St Andrews. We are lobbying political parties prior to the Holyrood elections in May, as well as liaising with Fife Council and the business and tourism sectors, in an attempt to provide information which Transport Scotland claimed to be lacking from the appraisal. In the meantime, as Transport Scotland said that an enhanced and integrated bus service between Leuchars rail station and St Andrews must demonstrate best practice and be an exemplar of its type, StARLink will ensure that they stick to this, although it will not attract nearly as many of St Andrews' seven million annual visitors as would a rail service. Although Glasgow Central retained its position as the



Jane Ann Liston

most-used Scottish railway station in the Office for Rail and Road tables with 25,293,930 passengers, Edinburgh Waverley, with 22,755,164, is apparently set to overtake it in a year or two.

It was interesting to see how the five newest stations had fared. **Reston** (opened 2022) went up from 21,130 (2024) to 29,896 (2025). **Inverness Airport** (opened 2023) went up from 53,920 to 61,166. **East Linton** (2023) from 21,624 to 66,982. The first-year figures for **Cameron Bridge** are 45,796 and for **Leven** 185,424. With so many passengers in just 10 months, Leven looks set to overtake fellow Fife station Cupar, which was used by 196,056 over 12 months.

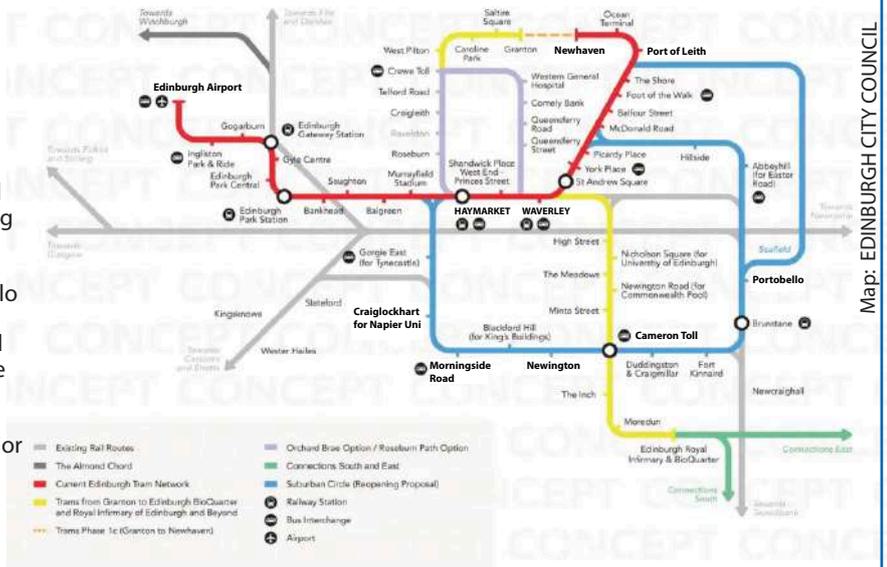


Keith station at 1000 on 8 January, with the temperature at minus 8.5 Celsius. Staff had done a brilliant job clearing the platform and car park

Picture: RODERICK CROMAR

Tram-trains great leap forward

Edinburgh's proposed mass transit line would have 12 stops, including Morningside, Napier University, Newington, Cameron Toll, Portobello and Leith. The full network would provide fast links to the Royal Infirmary and Western General hospitals, both the major football stadia at Tynecastle and Easter Road, the University of Edinburgh's King's Buildings campus and the Royal Commonwealth Pool.



An indicative map of the Edinburgh mass transit proposals. These include running tram-trains on a third tram route which would incorporate the South Sub (blue)

Map: EDINBURGH CITY COUNCIL

London & South East

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Good news
We start 2026 on a bright note, there being a string of good news likely to result in new or better passenger services in our region. The Thamesmead extension of the Docklands Light Railway has been given the go-ahead, crucially with key issues on funding determined. The West London orbital route, linking Hendon with Hounslow via the freight-only Dudding Hill line, has also taken a step closer to reality, with funding for the next stage of planning. Railfuture London and South East is stepping up its work on this project, with many issues to consider. For example, Hounslow is on a loop line with just two trains



an hour so not the best southern destination unless frequency is increased on the loop. We continue to engage with stakeholders, having recently attended meetings with Govia Thameslink Railway, South Western Railway, Network Rail and Transport for London. We see our efforts beginning to bear fruit. One of our main campaigns is to see a metro service (at least four trains per hour) on all Greater London services, and service improvements where that is not practical. We continue to campaign for the following off-peak improvements, and with some of these we are seeing a willingness from the operators to engage with us:

- Increasing the service on the Hounslow and Kingston loops to four trains per hour
- Increasing the Waterloo to Guildford via Epsom service to 2tp

- Increasing the Sutton to Victoria service to 4tp
- Increasing the West London line service (Watford-Clapham Jct-East Croydon) to 2tp
- Increasing trains on the Catford loop (Denmark Hill to Ravensbourne) to 4tp
- Introducing a Sunday service on the Bromley North-Grove Park branch for connections to Charing Cross.

Meanwhile TfL has indicated a desire to take over the Great Northern inner services out of Moorgate, and we have been actively discussing this with both TfL and GTR, trying to ensure best passenger outcomes. Our capacity concerns regarding the Brighton main line continue, and we have had meetings with MPs in affected constituencies. Through them, we have contact

with the newly set up all-party parliamentary group for the Southeast and Gatwick Diamond Growth Gateway. A matter of concern to us is the extension of contactless ticketing outside Greater London, which has raised a number of issues, such as the inability to link concession cards to contactless. We are working hard to both highlight the issues and find practical solutions. We believe the start in January of battery electric trains on the West Ealing-Greenford line is extremely promising. It may well lead to a solution for many branch lines needing to move from aged diesel multiple units to a cost-effective electric alternative.

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Chair's column by Chris Page

Growth opportunity for railways

The Long Term Rail Strategy identified in the Railways Bill will include five strategic objectives:

- Meeting customers' needs
- Financial sustainability
- Long-term economic growth
- Reducing regional and national inequality
- Environmental sustainability

They largely mirror what we have been calling for, but should explicitly identify rail growth as an objective.

The Bill must facilitate industry delivery against these objectives, to achieve growth and long term modal shift to rail throughout Britain. The railway must also be accountable to all levels of Government, national and regional. The following areas need more definition in the bill:

- Definition of the customer interface with focus on passenger and freight customer needs
- Delivery of coherent, flexible and value for money fares and freight access charges, with pricing set to support the nation's wider objectives
- A structure which facilitates improved operational service quality focused on delivery
- Confidence to invest in innovation, efficiency and capacity for modal shift and traffic growth through a long-term plan for investment and improved relations with staff and unions
- Allowing devolved authorities to make choices and incorporate rail in their plans by participating in train service specification and investing in the future of rail
- A secure funding stream to invest in service quality, capacity and future growth.

We welcome Lord Hendy pointing out that the Transport Secretary's powers are rarely used to direct National Highways, and Great British Railways should be no different – but then why are 400 staff still needed working in DfT on rail strategy? The government should set the strategic objectives (what), but GBR should decide the strategy (how).

Northern Powerhouse Rail

On 14 January, the government announced plans to develop NPR in three phases, building on the TransPennine Route Upgrade between Leeds and Manchester, which is in progress. For details:

www.railfuture.org.uk/Northern-powerhouse#Government_sets_out_plans_for_Northern_Powerhouse_Rail

Journey times across the north of England will improve, but the key benefits will be increased capacity and connectivity between the northern cities, creating an agglomeration effect, which in time will drive economic growth and productivity.

The increased capacity will also enable more

frequent stopping services, particularly into Manchester, supporting the business case for the new route between Liverpool and Manchester. See pages 12,13 and 14 for more information and reaction.

The sum of £1.1 billion has been approved to make progress on planning and development work, which is needed to fill in some of the gaps in the announcements, for example whether Piccadilly will be an underground through station, where the new Bradford and Liverpool stations will be, and the routes between those and Manchester.

This investment demonstrates this government's commitment to rail. However, the remainder of the spend will be in the next Parliament, after the expenditure on High Speed Two reduces, so a change of government at the next election could put the whole programme at risk.

More indicators for the future

Although the Tyne and Wear Metro extension over the Leamside line is going ahead, development of the West Yorkshire Metro has been delayed.

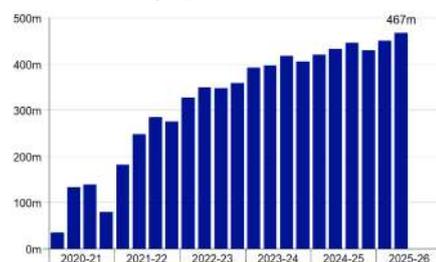
Digging the HS2 tunnels from Old Oak Common has started, and it seems that the design of the station at Euston will make passive provision for expansion to accommodate the maximum train frequency that the HS2 line could deliver.

Following Northern Powerhouse Rail, there is the possibility of using land already purchased by HS2 for a new route between Birmingham and Manchester relieving the West Coast main line. Meanwhile, the government should consider alternatives to HS2 joining the West Coast main line at Handsacre, which could avoid the pinchpoint at Shugborough.

The new GBR livery mockup is something of a distraction. More significant is that passenger numbers are growing, especially at stations opened recently.

Railfuture broadly welcomes the fares freeze this year, but the potential this has for modal shift is offset by the electric car and truck discounts that the government is introducing, the delay in introducing electric vehicle excise duty and the extension of the fuel duty cut. Promoting modal shift for freight could help to relieve the current shortage of HGV drivers.

Figure 1 Passenger journeys, Great Britain, quarterly data, April 2020 to September 2025



GROWTH: Latest graph from the ORR

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railfuture

campaigning for a bigger, better railway

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Turning point for a better railway

By Ray King and Roger Blake

Railways in Wales will be transformed by £14 billion of funding, UK prime minister Keir Starmer announced in February.

The long-term investment and an end to “historic dither” will put Wales on the front foot, he predicted during a visit to Taff’s Wells Metro depot.

Funding was confirmed for seven train stations at Magor and Undy, Llanwern, Cardiff East, Newport West, Somerton, Cardiff Parkway and Deeside industrial park.

The UK government backed a list of 43 projects spelled out in Transport for Wales’ document *A Vision for Rail across Wales and Borders*.

One of the most promising benefits could be electrification of the North Wales main line to Llandudno and Holyhead which has been in the pending tray for well over 50 years.

Wales’ win came a month after the government pledged £45 billion for Northern Powerhouse Rail.

The UK government had already announced £445 million for rail projects in Wales at last June’s spending review.

Welsh first minister Eluned Morgan said the 43 projects in the latest announcement would take about 15 years to complete.

Work on five of the south-east Wales stations “will begin later this year”, with construction on two of them starting in 2029. It is expected that Magor and Undy will be the first station to be completed. The relief lines of the South Wales main line will be upgraded and slewed to accommodate the new stations.

Ministers said the Welsh government and private investors would fund a new Cardiff Parkway station near St Mellons.

Improvements to the Wrexham to Liverpool line will allow for two trains per hour and a new station at Deeside Industrial Park.

The other schemes across Wales include: Cardiff crossrail extensions, new stations on the Core Valley lines, increasing North Wales main line capacity and a direct service between Cardiff and Liverpool.

The UK government has faced repeated calls from all the parties in the Senedd to deliver extra rail investment for Wales.

Weather wise

The severe winter weather of floods and snow reinforced Railfuture’s determination to campaign for a bigger and better railway – and one that is more reliable and resilient.

Prevailing westerly winds brought flooding but the £165 million spent over 12 years on protecting the seaside railway at Dawlish, Devon, proved to be money well spent. Interruptions to train services were relatively short-lived.



Derby North MP Catherine Atkinson addresses guests at the Railfuture Westminster reception



Railfuture president Christian Wolmar with the MP



Railfuture’s Ian Brown makes a point at the rostrum

Railfuture ventures into Westminster

“It went rather well,” was Railfuture chair Chris Page’s verdict on the reception in Parliament in February to launch our discussion paper *A Growth Opportunity for Railways*.

The paper on the impacts and potential for Great British Railways comes at a critical time when the bill to establish GBR is proceeding through Parliament.

Railfuture is grateful to Catherine Atkinson, MP for Derby North, who hosted the event. It attracted other Parliamentarians and people from the wider rail community, including peers and rail industry leaders.

Key updates were given by Railfuture president Christian Wolmar, Railfuture policy director Ian Brown and Ms Atkinson.

Railfuture communications director Neil Middleton said: “As I look back, I see it as a success – we had enough MPs and other useful contacts in the room for sensible and productive conversations. We may do another one.”

Ian Brown said: “It was a really excellent event with so many MPs so keenly aware of rail’s potential to address these issues with a bigger, better railway, incentivised to obtain modal shift to rail.”

Railfuture’s core message was that promoting growth must be the key strategic objective the government should set for GBR.

The operational objectives of value for money, reliability, connectivity and customer focus then follow

naturally as they are necessary to deliver growth in rail and therefore in the economy. Our aim is to double both passenger and freight traffic through a customer-focused culture, a much better passenger experience, attractive fares, investment in facilities and capacity which enable major house building, plus financial incentives to encourage modal shift.

Railfuture also floated the concept of a new free railcard to encourage people to use rail. It would be available to everyone, particularly for the 50% of the population who use rail infrequently and may not be eligible for any of the existing railcards.

The six-page briefing document is being sent to hundreds of MPs who have registered an interest in rail.

Read Railfuture’s *A Growth Opportunity for Railways* paper here.

www.railfuture.org.uk/display4276

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Railfuture in the News

Normally at this time of year, Railfuture would issue a press release bemoaning yet another inflation-busting rail fare increase and, if we created the right sound bite, we would be quoted in most of the national newspapers and maybe even make the headlines on the BBC’s Six O’Clock News. This year – nothing. Why? Because the government has frozen rail fares and given us nothing to complain about. How dare they steal our thunder by giving us what we wanted! Rail campaigning works. Rest assured we are still making lots of noise and getting plenty of national and local coverage on other subjects, such as timetable changes, contactless, the Tarka line and Northern Powerhouse Rail. Details, as ever, are documented on the Railfuture web page:

www.railfuture.org.uk/Railfuture-in-the-news