railwatch

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Picture: PETER MOORE

The Far North

Winter challenge on Scotland's single-track lifeline: See page 2

Also inside: Christian Wolmar's Treasury fear ● Change of strategy ahead ● Vision for Scotland Ian Brown on Innotrans Berlin ● Bruce's delay-repay torment ● More new stations

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Wales bus could be a virtual train

After heatwaves, snow is new challenge

PAGE ONE PICTURE

Our page one picture of a Wick-bound train on the Far North line could well be a Christmas-card scene.

But Peter Moore's February 2019 photograph of a class 158 near Ardgay heralds probable trouble ahead for the winter of 2026-27.

After a year of storms and high temperatures, the next challenge for the railway is snow.

Scotland's Far North line is particularly vulnerable to disruption because it is single track.

The line runs from Inverness to Thurso and Wick – 168 miles in all – with four trains a day in each direction which skirt Cromarty and Dornoch firths.

Of course, much of Perth-Inverness Highland main line is also largely single track.

Rail engineer and author Gareth Dennis has told Railfuture it could and should be electrified and dualled.

It would cost around £2 billion, as against more than £3 billion to dual the A9 road.

In a world where road traffic is identified as one of the leading causes of global warming, only people with heads in the sand would prefer improving the road network over improving the railway.

The line runs alongside the A9 for some of its length and, once upgraded, would have enormous potential to attract people from road to rail travel.

■ *Gareth's ambitions for Scotland's railway: Page 5*



Pictures: FRANK ROACH

READY: A class 37 diesel on the Far North line at Rogart in January and, below, in action



Can we bank on Sir John to win over the Treasury?

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN
By Christian Wolmar

Great British Railways is beginning to take shape. Well, at least it has a chairman, and we know that it will be housed in a building in Derby city centre. There is still much to be done but that is a start. A good one.

The choice of Sir John Kingman as chairman is by far the more significant of these two decisions. As far as the office block is concerned, it is a bit odd that it is in Derby city centre rather than nearer the station and all the other rail-related buildings there, but regeneration is top of the government agenda and the city centre is a bit down on its heels – though not as bad as many others I have visited in recent times.

Go to Harlesden in west London near Willesden Junction if you want to see a place in urgent need of regeneration.

I am sure that the railway "family" will all get used to the 15-minute walk – or five-minute taxi ride for those not doing their daily 10,000 steps – from the station to GBR HQ.

Of course, there are still a lot of known unknowns in respect of exactly how many people will be housed in the new building and whether there will be a London sub-office designed, perhaps, to attract those unwilling to move to the East Midlands. In any case, who works in offices these days? More importantly, as I have said, it is the choice of a senior banker with Treasury experience that will have an important impact on the future of the railways. Sir John, as I suppose we must call him, is clearly a canny bloke given his past record, as he rose to be chairman of Barclays and Legal & General. He will, of course, face a sharp learning curve in relation to the railways, about which he seems to have no particular knowledge. In the old days he would have been presented at a press conference where we could have grilled him about his experience and his plans, but sadly those events are no longer held. I have barely been to any since Covid. Instead we got a vapid statement in a press release about looking forward to creating a more integrated railway or some such blather produced by his communications team.



Sir John Kingman



Christian Wolmar

In the absence of any further briefing from his press team, I will tell you about his key plan – and that is to engage with the Treasury. To ensure they do not interfere with decisions which GBR executives should make. He was the number two civil servant in the Treasury at the time of the financial crisis in the back end of the noughties, and it is that experience which will stand him – and the railways generally – in good stead. The railways are under the cosh at the moment. Cutbacks, savings, deferred payments, investment pauses – these are the watchwords, and therefore having a strong chairman to bat for the railways when facing the Treasury is a major positive. And so is the tone of the rolling stock strategy published to coincide with the Labour party conference. While it lacks detail at the moment – that will come with the publication of a fleet and infrastructure study – it is clearly a good pointer to the way that GBR will work. The document makes clear that decisions will be made by the new railway organisation, rather than being left to the various other stakeholders in the fragmented railway. There is strong support for battery-electric trains, and the strategy sets out clearly that there will be a limited number of types of train in order to work towards standardisation. Clear requirements will be placed on manufacturers covering aspects such as accessibility, wifi provision and even toilets.

How this melds in with the devolution much favoured by Andy Burnham is an interesting question. Strong centralisation rather contradicts the idea of giving power to local or regional interests and suggests there may be some battles ahead.

Indeed it may complicate things for local campaigners seeking bespoke or cheap solutions for their particular railway.

Nevertheless a strong centre, run by experienced people at arms length from government and particularly the Treasury, will be good news for the railway. And that seems to be where GBR is heading.

■ *Christian Wolmar's latest book* Fast Track, The Extraordinary Story of High Speed Rail, *has been published, and signed discounted copies are available from* christian.wolmar@gmail.com

■ *Christian is also producing a weekly substack. Sign up for free or go for premium and get lots of extra features at:*

https://transportnews.substack.com/

Change of strategy for a rail future?

West Midlands shake-up may be replicated in other parts of Britain

By Steve Wright

The future of the West Midlands Rail Executive is uncertain – three years after I extolled its benefits (*Railwatch* 178 page 20).

The role and even the existence of the WMRE is now uncertain, because the way the Railways Bill – currently going through the parliamentary process – will put the onus of rail planning on to elected mayors, such as the mayor of the West Midlands, operating in conjunction with Great British Railways.

This is an issue that could affect many other regions of England. WMRE is special because it has been in existence for more than 10 years. Similar strategic bodies throughout Britain are much newer.

Throughout the West Midlands at present, planning of rail services is dealt with by three organisations, four if you include the embryonic GBR West Midlands.

Passenger transport within the area of the West Midlands Combined Authority (linking seven councils), is planned (and for buses operated) by Transport for the West Midlands.

TfWM has only a consultative role for rail services that start or finish outside, or pass through, the combined authority area.

TfWM is funded by the West Midlands councils plus grants from the UK government, roughly 50% each.

The WMRE was set up in 2015 from a collective decision of 14 local authorities across the region, led by Wolverhampton and Staffordshire, with the objective of having more local control and promoting development of rail services.

The Department for Transport worked with this partnership to devolve responsibility. WMRE is funded by the DfT (approximately 60%) and member councils.

Then there is Midlands Connect, set up about the same time as WMRE, to plan strategic transport improvements for road, rail and air across the whole of the Midlands, but especially for links between the East and West Midlands, and ease of access to other areas of Britain and overseas. Midlands Connect is funded 100% by the UK government.

We also now have GBR West Midlands which will plan improvements to the regional railway.

GBR-WM is funded by a mixture of DfT grants, passenger revenue, freight operators and commercial activities. These organisations do not work entirely in their own silos.

WMRE and TfWM co-operate on WMCA area issues; WMRE and Midlands Connect work together on major projects such the Midlands Rail Hub.

WMRE, together with the then WM Mayor Andy Street, was a prime mover in setting up the West Midlands Grand Rail Collaboration, bringing together all the passenger train operators, the Freight Group, Network Rail, Transport Focus and Birmingham University's Centre for Railway Research to provide a forum for timetable co-ordination, rail maintenance and to jointly resolve operational issues.

Back to the problem. While the role of TfWM is clear cut from the Railways Bill and Midlands Connect has recently been assured of its role come GBR (government funding will cease but Midlands Connect will become council leader-led), there is no provision in the Railways Bill for region-wide planning and strategic thinking other than through GBR. One might expect GBR West Midlands to take on this role. However, GBR-WM's area of operation includes only 60-70% of the area covered by WMRE. Railfuture West Midlands is concerned that, if WMRE disappears, there will be inadequate coherent region-wide medium or long-term thinking about future service provision.

Without WMRE, the neighbouring counties may have no other advocate for improving their rail services. They would rely on co-operation with TfWM, GBR and their adjacent counties. In addition to WMRE's planning role, since December 2017 it has shared management of West Midlands Railways contract with the DfT.

WMR was nationalised along with London Northwestern Railway in February and incorporated into the new GBR West Midlands.

For the time being, the present arrangements continue but change is expected when GBR is established as the network's "directing mind". It is not certain how this will function.

With GBR also taking a major role in rail operations and strategy nation-wide do we need four agencies?

Could the re-modelled Midlands Connect combine its inter-regional role with WMRE's? After all, already Midlands Connect works in tandem with WMRE on big-ticket projects.

The problem from our perspective is that it also promotes road improvement schemes and we all know what happens when an agency has responsibility for road as well as rail. Road gets priority.



Picture: HS2

HIGH SPEED TO THE WEST MIDLANDS: Work on HS2's railway approaches to Birmingham is proceeding apace. The Curzon 2 bridge, which is also known as the Bellingham Bridge (pictured above), was slid into place earlier this year. Curzon 2 is a key part of five connected viaducts, which will carry high speed trains into the new HS2 station at Curzon Street. In late October, HS2 also celebrated the installation of its final viaduct across the M6 at Chelmsley Wood, eight miles away from Curzon Street

Transport for West Midlands: Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton

West Midlands Rail Executive: West Midlands, Herefordshire, Northamptonshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Telford & Wrekin, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Cheshire East and Stoke-on-Trent are affiliate members





Denise Wetton and Andy Street

Keep a winning team working well

Here is my solution: Keep the West Midlands Rail Executive more or less as it is but closely associated with Great British Railways West Midlands, as the primary strategist for rail transport in the Greater West Midlands, keeping partial funding from and therefore ownership by the local authority councils.

Let WMRE also be the main planning agency for the rail element of the Transport for West Midlands area, while TfWM itself concentrates on non-rail transport in the West Midlands Combined Authority area. TfWM should also maintain a consultative and advisory role on rail.

Keep Midlands Connect as the inter-regional rail planning body. All these agencies seem to work well together now, so why break up a winning team?

Tunnelling for a high speed line under the Polish city of Lodz began in November

Hopes and fears for a Bristol metro

By Bruce Williamson

Hopes were raised in September that the Bristol area would finally be getting a regional Metro.

The optimism stemmed from prime minister Andy Burnham's response to a statement in the House of Commons by Sadik Al-Hassan, Labour MP for North Somerset.

Mr Al-Hassan said: "I am delighted that North Somerset is finally getting two fantastic new stations at Pill and Portishead with the reopening of the railway line, but—and I hate to sound greedy—with Bristol airport's potential expansion on the horizon, it risks becoming one of the worst-connected major airports in the country.

"Does my right honourable friend the prime minister agree that now we need a proper mass transit system for North Somerset and the west of England combined authority, linking Felton, the new Woodspring development, Long Ashton and the wider economic area?"

Prime minister Andy Burnham replied: "I know that my honourable friend worked hard on getting those new stations. People in Portishead and Pill have waited far too long for those new stations, but they are now on the way.

"It does reflect what I was saying to the House yesterday: the big cities of England – I am talking about Leeds and about Bristol – should have mass transit systems.

"I will work with the wonderful Mayor of the West of England, Helen Godwin, to make progress on that – to connect Bristol, its new arena, the station and the development of Temple Meads into a mass transit system that takes Bristol forward."

This all sounds very promising, but there have been many false dawns for a Bristol metro before (anyone remember Advanced Transport for Avon?) and there is a real danger that we might end up with a bus-based rapid transit system. Indeed, Bristol already has its "Metrobus", a series of bus routes which are partially guided.

The Greens currently have the largest number of councillors on Bristol City council, and their leader Emma Edwards recently told the BBC: "While a tram system would be a welcome addition, Bristol and the wider region still face significant connectivity challenges that only a well-funded and reliable bus network can address."

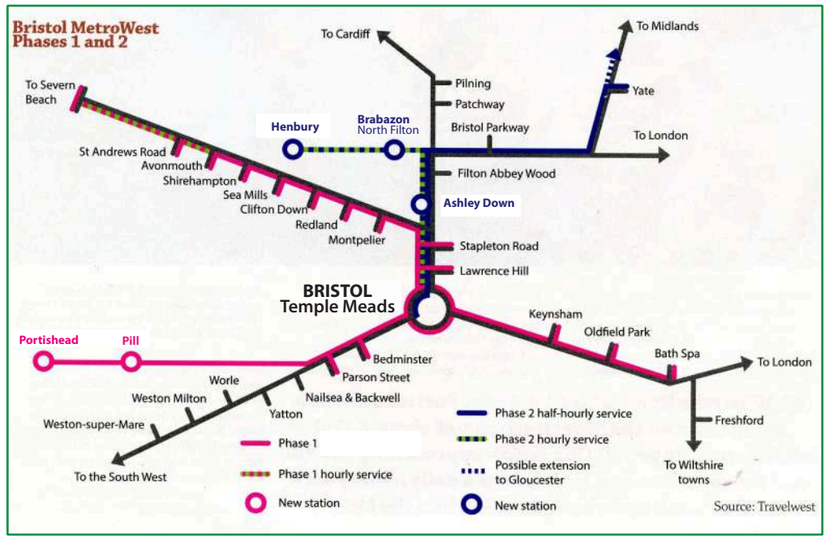
What's wrong with buses? Are we just being partisan, as pro-rail campaigners? Well, no.

Former Bristol mayor Marvin Rees had ambitions for a partly underground Bristol metro and commissioned a report from consultants Steer Davis Gleave in 2017.

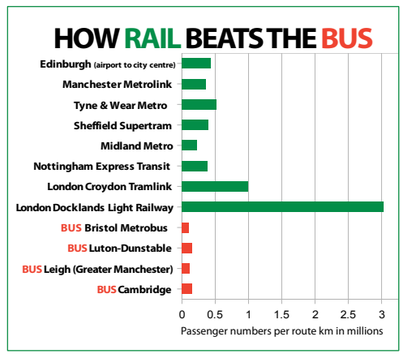
The consultants identified likely routes, analysed the populations around proposed stations and forecast passenger numbers of between 0.6 million and 1.19 million per route kilometre per year.

They also compared the Bristol area to other existing metro systems, using annual passenger numbers per route km as their measure of performance. These are shown in green on the chart.

Every one of the existing systems analysed in the consultants' report was rail-based, yet it was agnostic on the proposed mode of transport and was prepared to consider a bus-based rapid transit system. How well do these perform in comparison? Here are some figures I researched for bus-based systems in the UK, shown in red in the chart above.



WORK IN PROGRESS: Plans under way include reopening the lines to Portishead while the new Brabazon station (near former North Filton) was scheduled to open in November. But Bristol needs much more, including a line to the airport. Will it be rail or bus rapid transit? Plans for a rail-based sytem have been on the drawing board for years. This Travelwest map shows the MetroWest programme of railway upgrades funded by the West of England Combined Authority



The chart is based on using annual passengers per route kilometre as a measure of performance for different technologies. This was the measure of performance used in the consultants' report.

Cambridge's 25-kilometre system attracts 3.7 million annual journeys – 148,000 per route kilometre.

Leigh's (Greater Manchester) 22-kilometre system attracts 2.6 million annual journeys – 118,000 per route kilometre.

Luton-Dunstable's 13.4-kilometre system attracts 2 million annual journeys – 150,000 per route kilometre.

Bristol's existing part-guided 50 kilometres of Metrobus routes have attracted 25 million total journeys over their lifetime – approximately 100,000 per route kilometre annually.

Updated figures are difficult to obtain but it is clear that bus cannot match the performance of a rail-based system, with even the best performing bus system doing worse than the worst performing rail-based one. London's Docklands Light Railway is a spectacular 30 times better at attracting passengers than Bristol's existing guided Metrobus. It is clear how dismally bus-based systems perform in comparison to rail-based ones.

So, rail is better than bus. All Railfuture members and planners and **many** politicians know that, so what is the problem? The problem is that **some** politicians do not seem to understand this, and view buses, trams and trains as equivalent modes of transport.

The consultants' estimates for the performance of a Bristol metro, which might be bus-based, will be between six and 12 times better than the existing Metrobus.

Of course, buses are cheaper, so badly informed politicians go for the bus option, and we (the travelling public) end up with sub-standard public transport and roads that remain stubbornly congested.

The Steer Davis Gleave report of 2017 attempts to make forecasts of passenger numbers without specifying whether the proposed service is a bus or a tram. This is absolutely ludicrous. You cannot make a business plan without knowing what you are selling. Yet apparently those forecasts would apply equally to a horse-drawn open-top charabanc.

It is an all-too-familiar story for Railfuture campaigns. Cambridge could have had a rail-based mass transit network called Cambridge Connect, but successive administrations have chased the holy grail of "better buses".

West Oxfordshire can have a rail-based mass transit system serving the congested and rapidly growing A40 corridor, based on a new railway to Witney. Will Bertie the Bus baffle again?

In Hertfordshire, some are obsessed by "trackless trams" at the expense of rail.

The truth is: There are no solely bus-based solutions. Buses work best when they feed into an efficient rail network. A bus-based rapid transit sytem simply cannot match the performance of rail.

Join Railfuture at *www.railfuture.org.uk/join/*

Gareth's vision for new lines in Scotland

By Jane Ann Liston

This autumn Railfuture Scotland held a webinar featuring railway engineer, author and podcaster Gareth Dennis, who outlined his proposals for enhancing the Scottish network.

First, Gareth listed some criteria for a rail connection: a settlement with a population of more than 5,000, certainly 10,000, a corridor served by a dual carriageway, a settlement which is a strategic port or freight receptor or a key tourist corridor.

Local needs could justify a rail connection, as could national or strategic ones, such as plugging a missing link in regional connectivity. Gareth then gave examples of lines he considered should be built, noting that east-west links tended to be conspicuous by their absence and also the importance of rail connections to ferry ports.

The first candidate was Tweedbank to Carlisle, which would shorten the journey from Edinburgh by 48 minutes, as well as increasing resilience by providing an alternative route to the West Coast main line.

Next was restoring a line between Dumfries and Stranraer and extending it from Stranraer to Cairnryan, to reinstate a railway connection with the Northern Ireland ferries, relieving the traffic load on the A75 road.

Gareth then proposed a direct link between Inverness and Fort William down the Great Glen, which is a route popular with tourists. At present, such a journey made by train goes via Glasgow, involves at least one change and takes at least seven and a quarter hours. The next would be a new 32-mile line, last considered over a hundred years ago, from Garve to Ullapool. This would not only provide a rail link to the Stornoway ferries but would also alleviate the pressure on the North Coast 500 route. Next mentioned was Dunblane-Crianlarich, followed by urban enhancements, such as the Clydelink, North Clyde and Argyll lines from Glasgow. On the other side of the country, due to the pressures on the East Coast main line, four-tracking was proposed as far as Drem.

Graphic: RAILWATCH



***A map showing Gareth Dennis's ambitious plans for building new railways in Scotland, based on a graphic published in* The Herald**

What Gareth described as "disconnected settlements" came next, and the example selected was Leuchars-St Andrews, in particular to manage traffic heading for the Open Championship and also that associated with the university.

Gareth then turned to the vexed question of the Inverness-Perth corridor. The Scottish government is slowly dualling the A9 road. However, economic benefits are likely to be lost because of traffic congestion, especially on the feeder roads, and there is also likely to be considerable environmental damage in rural areas. Gareth noted that there was still £3.8 billion in the dualling budget, but he suggested instead that for £2 billion of that, the railway could be fully doubled and electrified.

Gareth also emphasised the importance of high-speed connectivity, such as between Edinburgh and Glasgow, and of course it could also relieve the West Coast main line. Afterwards, Gareth answered several questions on various aspects of the Scottish railways, including an observation that one reason for a lack of integration with buses was the resistance of the bus lobby to re-regulation, which was food for thought especially in the light of the Scottish Government's current proposals to do just that.

The online meeting was attended by over 40 members and Gareth's positive and can-do approach gave us all much to think about.

East Midlands

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EMR rolling stock problems

Problems with the new Aurora bimode trains caused East Midlands Railway to reduce inter-city operations (London to Nottingham and Sheffield) to 87% of the full timetable in July. There has been a gradual recovery since then, to 92% on 1 September and 96% on 19 October, but EMR is still not committed to extending the busier services to 10-car operation to match the original timetable. Railfuture has expressed concern about the overcrowding that is still being experienced.

The Department for Transport instructed EMR to further improve the reliability of its service before it is taken into public ownership by the end of 2027. Railfuture's Steve Jones commented that we hope that EMR becoming part of Great British Railways will bring about better coordination and integration across the network, but that we need to see the detail first. As a temporary measure while EMR struggles because of delays to the introduction of the Auroras, the operator announced in November that it would be deploying two extra five-car Voyager class 221 units – operating as a 10-car train – from mid December.

Railfuture joint meeting

Railfuture East Midlands took part in a very successful joint meeting with Lincolnshire and Yorkshire branches, hosted by Yorkshire in Sheffield on 10 October. The aim was to explore issues of common interest and concern to all three branches.

The speakers were:

- Kevin Towle, rail development manager (South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority), who spoke about the pivotal role of Sheffield station in many inter-regional journeys, a role much hampered by limits on its capacity.
- Anne Robinson (Hope Valley Climate Action), who outlined the "Mini-Switzerland" proposals centred on the Hope Valley line, with buses coordinating with trains in the way that is well known in Switzerland. This is intended to reduce the overwhelming dependence on cars for access to and travel around the Peak District.
- Stephen Chaytow (Friends of the Derwent Valley Line), who led a discussion on inter-regional connectivity, plus current campaigns including enhanced services for Belper and a station for Clay Cross, near Chesterfield.

Station adopters share ideas

Railfuture East Midlands was well represented at the annual East Midlands Railway community rail and station adopters' conference at the Motorpoint Arena in Nottingham on 21 October. Delegates from many station adopters' groups and community rail partnerships gathered to hear presentations and share ideas, both in workshop sessions and informally during the refreshment breaks. Presentations included a business update from EMR's interim managing director Neil Grabham, while Bill Freeman, chief executive of the community rail network, reiterated the value of community rail in connecting communities to their railway. He stressed the need for community rail to be embedded in the Great British Railways business units as part of the forthcoming rail reform. Workshop sessions covered biodiversity and wildlife-friendly stations, the use of social media and other ways of promoting volunteer activity, as well as funding for these activities. Along with numerous CRPs and similar groups, East Midlands branch had a publicity stand at "the marketplace" as part of the event.

www.railfuture.org.uk/East+Midlands+Branch

X @RailfutureEMids

Have you ever thought of becoming a Railfuture director? If yes, see Neil Middleton vice-chair's column on page 23

Christmas train alert

There will be no passenger trains at Birmingham New Street station for five days over Christmas.

Overhead power lines in and around the station will be replaced by Network Rail as part of a £13 million project.

The five-day closure, from Thursday 24 December to Monday 28 December, will require long-distance services to be diverted and rail replacement buses for journeys starting or ending at Birmingham New Street.

CrossCountry will be significantly affected because nearly all its services normally call at New Street.

The work is the first phase of a three-year programme. Further upgrades are planned during the Christmas periods of 2027 and 2028.

"Much of the overhead line equipment dates back to the 1960s and needs to be replaced," said Martin Colmey of Network Rail. Station facilities, including the assisted travel lounge and toilets, will remain open while services are not running. Station staff will be on hand every day to provide help and assistance to passengers.

Timetable updates and travel advice are available at www.crosscountrytrains.co.uk/major-engineering-work-birmingham-new-street

There will be lots of other planned engineering works and upgrades taking place as Network Rail works to improve the railway. More information:

https://www.nationalrail.co.uk/travel-information/christmas/

You can plan and check your journey before you travel using:

https://www.nationalrail.co.uk/journey-planner/

Railfuture gets down to business

Railfuture branch representatives joined directors for an online board meeting on 31 October.

Improving the ways branches can contact members and supporters by better use of Railfuture's database were discussed, along with ways to contact members by particular postcodes or parliamentary constituencies.

The board was told Chris Page was preparing a two-page document about Railfuture's vision and role for the parliamentary reception in November. Around 20 MPs were expected to attend.

Owen O'Neill agreed to investigate ways to protect the Railfuture and Railwatch brands.

Railfuture Wales is being asked if it could organise the national AGM in Cardiff for 2027. Birmingham is also a possibility.

The budget for next year was approved, with the possibility of £10,000 for the North Devon line strategic outline business case being spread over two years. Work is ongoing to update bank signatories and move away from a spreadsheet-based accounting system.

Railfuture's general fund is projected to drop by £13,000 next year, potentially causing long-term problems.

Alternative options for the membership system and use of specialist bulk email services are also to be considered. Spam is an intermittent but major issue.

Concern was raised about problems with replacement bus services. Railfuture's passenger group will be preparing our views to pass on to the emerging Great British Railways.

The next board meeting is tentatively planned for April in person, with a possible shorter online session in January if needed.



Rocket All Aboard is planning celebrations for the Liverpool and Manchester Railway's 200th anniversary in 2029/30.
www.rocketallaboard.co.uk

Do you have IT skills?

The Railfuture membership system and the website are key challenges

Interested? Please contact

jerry.alderson@railfuture.org.uk
or
chris.page@railfuture.org.uk

West Midlands



RAILFUTURE TEAM: Steve Wright (centre) at New Street station

steve.wright@railfuture.org.uk

Railfuture promotion

Railfuture West Midlands staged a promotional event on the concourse of Birmingham New Street station on 7 October. During the stint from about 1030 to 1600 volunteers rarely had nobody at the stall and had interesting conversations with at least 30 people. Other people just wanted information. Most raised issues about train cancellations or worsened services, but one woman had a long discussion about difficulties that people with learning difficulties have in finding their way around New Street Station and how it might be improved – for everyone.

Aldridge station

Construction of a new Aldridge station (near Walsall on the Sutton Park line) has been put on hold indefinitely. Railfuture West Midlands is planning to meet local MP Wendy Morton to try to breathe new life into the project.

Executive discussions

Railfuture West Midlands representatives met senior West Midlands Rail Executive managers in October. Discussions were wide ranging, covering progress with the Midlands Rail Hub, local ticket reform (to be introduced in 2027), car parking charges in the combined authority area, a new West Midlands rail service to Manchester Airport (starting next May), prospects for a new station south of Stoke-on-Trent and a direct Shrewsbury-London service. The detailed business case for Midlands Rail Hub is expected next year. However, the executive is seeking extra funding to include a full business case for MRH (East), which includes two extra platforms at Moor Street station (to the north of the present through platforms), improvements at Water Orton, access to Kingsbury freight depot and various other small freight schemes. So far, the Department for Transport has not provided funding, so alternative sources are being sought, especially from local councils likely to benefit from the scheme, including Nottingham which could gain a significantly faster service to Birmingham. The executive is also keen to advance certain elements of the main scheme, including reopening platform 4 at Snow Hill station and reintroducing six trains per hour on the Cross-City line.

Model railway festival

Railfuture was represented at the National Festival of Railway Modelling at the NEC on 21 and 22 November (Hall 5). The aim was to meet Railfuture members there, as well as recruiting new ones.

www.railfuture.org.uk/West-Midlands-Branch

Lottery winners

August M Kneen, H Patton, J Henderson, G Smith, W Morton, L Butler

September R Goring, A McFie, R Grainger, R White, M Kneen, W Buttigieg

October G Smith, T Davies, W Buttigieg, S Hyland, J Ward, M Savage

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.

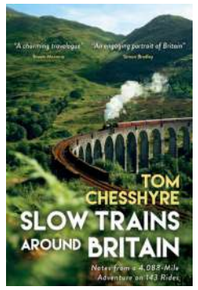
Taking part is easy – contact lottery@railfuture.org.uk and decide how many entries you want every month and how you would like to pay: via online banking, Paypal or cheque.

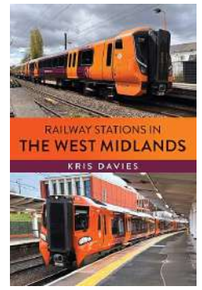
With 72 winners every year and increased prizes in the December draw, give it a try – who knows, you could easily be a winner!

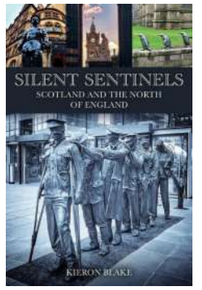
From Darlington to all points of Chesshyre's unique railway compass

BOOK REVIEWS BY RICHARD LYSONS

Slow Trains around Britain – Notes from a 4,088-mile adventure on 143 rides
By Tom Chesshyre
Summersdale Publishers
ISBN 978-1837997848 £12.99







Tom Chesshyre's name and reputation will already be known to many *Railwatch* readers. He has written a dozen travel books, having worked for *The Times* for 21 years. There have been previous *Slow Train* books to Venice, around Spain and to Istanbul from the author.

Books about rail journeys in Britain are in a crowded market. I have read titles by Paul Theroux, Bill Bryson, Matthew Engel, Michael Williams, Julian Holland and, most recently, Nige Tassell (see *Railwatch* 189) over the years.

Tom Chesshyre's book is one of the better ones, partly because of his journalist's eyes and ears for the appearance and utterances of his fellow passengers (he surely must have either used shorthand or a recording device to capture such priceless conversations).

I enjoyed reading the author's observations on the varying standards and reliability of Britain's trains and, indeed, the country's hotels, eateries and pubs.

On a long, circular series of rides beginning and ending in Darlington, Chesshyre enjoys the scenery and seeks out the history of Britain's railways.

In nine chapters, he travels as far north as Thurso in Scotland, then to Penzance in Cornwall and to Sheerness in Kent as he celebrates 200 years of passenger railways.

The author is especially good on the highs and lows of solo train travel. Worryingly, there is more than one occasion when Chesshyre feels threatened by this solitary status as a rail traveller. He writes about the wonderful views in Snowdonia as well as the faded grandeur of Scarborough and conveys the sheer exhaustion of frequently changing trains in Britain. I can feel – and empathise with – every delay, enforced alighting and bus replacement!

There are eight pages of slightly small colour photographs which complement Chesshyre's entertaining text. The book ends with the mileage and timings of each of his 143 train journeys. This should especially appeal to all *Railwatch* readers.

Railway Stations in the West Midlands
By Kris Davies
Amberley Publishing
ISBN 978-1398126510 £15.99

Silent Sentinels: Scotland and the North of England
By Kieron Blake
Amberley Publishing
ISBN 978-1398129634 £15.99

I never would have thought, even 20 years ago, how important railway stations would become in my life. I am chair of a station friends group in Greater Manchester and am heavily involved in community rail. Wherever I travel on the network, whether to rail meetings or on holiday and day trips, I find myself scrutinising the stations.

I helped in the judging of a "large stations" category for Cheshire Best Kept Stations two years ago. As part of my research work for the new Liverpool to Manchester Community Rail Partnership, I have visited every station on the Chat Moss and Cheshire Lines Committee routes in recent years. I look up their passenger figures, find out about their history and discover, first hand, how easy it is to reach nearby attractions on foot or by bus. Nearly all the cliches about railway stations are true. They really can be community hubs, and say so much about their surroundings, their clientele and their management. Very often, the local community has volunteers who adopt the station and work on gardening, litter picking, displaying artwork or working with local schools and colleges.

The latest book on West Midlands stations from Amberley follows the style of previous titles on this subject. But the book begs the question: How could we have let so many attractive and historic stations be demolished and replaced by drab, inadequate ones? In contrast, Shirley – on the Shakespeare line in Solihull – was opened in 1908 by GWR and manages to successfully combine old and new, retaining its original brick buildings but adding lifts and an enclosed footbridge.

Birmingham New Street's subterranean-feel platforms remain depressing and – to quote the author – "dark and dingy".

Davies's photographs are excellent, but nearly all lack (as a colleague observed) the presence of human beings. Disappointingly, there is just one photograph showing station artwork (Coseley) and no mention of station adoption or community rail.

However, this will still be a useful book for rail campaigners and station adopters in the region, but one hopes that rail industry managers and transport planners will also purchase copies.

I met a friend from Liverpool at Manchester Piccadilly station recently. As we walked out of the station's main entrance, I hurried past the *Victory Over Blindness* statues of seven First World War soldiers.

I had seen this striking sculpture dozens of times in recent years and perhaps taken the statues for granted. My guest stopped in his tracks as he had not seen this work by Johanna Domke-Guyot ever before. *Victory Over Blindness* is featured in the 20 chapters of Kieron Blake's fascinating book, *Silent Sentinels*, about the statues and sculptures that are linked to railway stations in Scotland and the North of England.

Blake goes into some detail about the aforementioned Manchester sculpture, reminding us that "around 30,000 men were discharged from service with damaged eyesight" in the 1914 to 1918 war, with 10% of these permanently blinded. This is perhaps the most thought-provoking section of the book, but there are others of similar seriousness.

Other statues range from the historical – King Edward VII and Josiah Wedgwood – to the hysterical – Desperate Dan and Ken Dodd. All the selected sculptures have interesting back stories and most chapters have more than one photograph of each memorial, taken from different angles.

These make one appreciate the quality of such contrasting artworks, from the statues of Philip Larkin at Hull to the little boy at Wemyss Bay.

I expect this original and well-illustrated book to become popular with travellers of all ages. It would be an ideal companion for families on days out by rail, linking stations with national, military, literary, cultural and industrial history.The book weighsapproximately 300g.

■■ *Richard Lysons is secretary of STORM, the Rochdale area rail user group, and co-organiser of the Electric Railway Charter*

Women gaining recognition for their importance to the railway

The number of women applying for jobs with train operator Northern has doubled following the launch of a targeted recruitment campaign.

We're Not Northern Without Her celebrates the female employees who work hard to keep trains running, and encourages more women to pursue a career in the industry.

The Northern initiative won the award for best diversity and inclusion strategy at the Employer Brand Management Awards in September. The judges praised the success of the campaign. When it was launched last year, around 17% of people applying for jobs with Northern were women. That figure has almost doubled, rising to 33%, with Northern praised for tackling a long-standing gender imbalance in the rail industry.

Gina Edge of Northern said: "The campaign was built around a really simple ambition to challenge perceptions of what a career in rail looks like, and encourage more women to see that there is a place for them at Northern.

"What makes this special is the impact we have seen since the campaign was launched. Winning this award is fantastic recognition for everyone who helped bring the campaign to life, but the work does not stop here. We want to build on that momentum and continue breaking down barriers, challenging perceptions and creating an industry where more women can see themselves building a long-term career."

■ The winners of the Women in Rail Awards 2026 were announced at InnoTrans in Berlin in September. Suzanne Flynn of Irish Rail won the Next Generation in Rail award, Réka Németh of Hungarian Railways won the Women in Rail Operations award while Cecilia Vale of Porto University won the Research and Innovation award, while the Women Empowerment and Leadership award went to Captrain.



Your views

A better Orbital

I have responded as an individual member of Railfuture to the Transport for London consultation on the West London Orbital rail scheme which involves introducing a passenger service between Brent Cross in north London and Acton and Hounslow in west London.

It is vital that this proposed scheme incorporates the following:

- Full electrification (overhead or third rail) of the route
- Resignalling to improve train frequencies
- Sufficient capacity for freight as well as passenger services
- Interchange at all stations with existing train services
- Provision of dual-voltage electric trains capable of operating on both overhead and third rail lines
- All stations on the West London Orbital should have improved bus stops near station entrances

Providing better interchanges is crucial. For example, passengers should be able to interchange at Brent Cross West not just with the Thameslink "inner suburban" stopping service but with the Luton Airport Express service which should stop there. This would allow people to switch to the Express trains which serve Bedford, Kettering, Welllingborough and Corby.

Further west, at Neasden, West London Orbital passengers will be able to interchange with Jubilee line Underground trains. But new platforms could be built to allow interchange with Metropolitan line Underground trains, as well as Chiltern's National Rail services.

At South Acton, there could be an interchange with the Piccadilly and District Underground lines, if South Acton station was relocated.

I have some experience in this field as I am an MSc (transport planning), a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Transport and was employed in transport planning for the British Railways Board.

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Try another way

Owing to "capacity constraints" on the West Coast main line, the Office of Rail and Road has not supported three recent long-distance proposals to London Euston (from Rochdale, Blackpool and Wrexham via Shrewsbury). The desire to keep an extra 10 plus trains each way off the WCML between Rugby and Euston is understandable, but might the proposals be re-routed through Nuneaton on to the Midland main line to London St Pancras? These services could then connect with proposed new HS1 services at St Pancras International, to be marketed as coordinated travel products with through ticketing.

Alternatively, the newly nationalised East Midland operators might extend their services north-west, sending new bimode class 810 Aurora trains through Nuneaton into the proposed areas. Coupling the five-car units could minimise the traffic burden on the core network, with splitting to maximise outreach in new catchments.

Chris Worker, Penparcau, Aberystwyth SY23 3RZ
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Hysterical debate

The banning of e-bikes by Merseyrail comes after a rather hysterical debate. E-bikes are not dangerous but like anything involving energy they can be made dangerous in foolish hands. The risks associated with decent bikes on trains is infinitely small. The government should have banned equipment of dubious origin years ago, but there is a lack of regulation with bikes, scooters and batteries.

David Henshaw, editor of AtoB magazine, Castle Cary BA7 7DB
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No pining in Pilning

Graham Larkbey's article on Pilning (*Railwatch* 189) was generous, and we are grateful to *Railwatch* for keeping the station in view. May I gently reset one word, though: "pines". Pilning does not pine, and it is not a Cinderella waiting for love. It is a maintained, electrified station on a main line, deliberately run down to two trains a week. That is the point people miss. A derelict halt invites sympathy and the usual answer: "no money, no priority". A working, wired, cared-for station with the public locked out of one of its two platforms invites a harder question: not why has it been neglected, but who decided this and why does the decision still stand?

The footbridge is a symptom. So is the closed car park and the vehicular access shut off last year.

The disease is an accountability gap: a community quietly left off the map by bodies that each assume another is responsible. This, in a place where the warehouses beside the track bus their workers in by road across the Severn, from the very places the trains through Pilning come from and pass without stopping.

So Pilning is not, in the end, a hard luck story. It is the cheapest possible test of whether the grand transport ambitions now being spoken of across our region mean anything at all. A place can spend hundreds of millions on new stations while an existing one sits ready and ignored, or it can choose not to. Pilning tells you which. We are not asking for love. We are asking for a decision.

Olga Taylor, Pilning Station Group
savepilningstation@gmail.com
www.pilningstation.uk

New way for Pilning

Once again the sorry state of affairs at Pilning in South Gloucestershire has got into a railway journal. However, can anyone with some knowledge of the area explain why this station appears to be some distance from the village?

The other critical question is whether Pilning could have an entirely new station near where the B4055 road goes over the line. I appreciate that this is technically more difficult now that there are masts supporting the overhead power lines, but a station serving both Pilning and Redwick seems a better choice.

David Peters, Sussex Drive, Shrewsbury SY3 7NG

Do not forget Brigg

Graham Larkbey writes about so-called Cinderella stations (*Railwatch* 189). To this of course must be added Brigg in Lincolnshire. There used to be three trains in each direction, but only on a Saturday. This though enabled people from Brigg to spend a day in either Grimsby or Cleethorpes. Indeed someone I knew used to take advantage of this service to visit her brother in a care home.

Today, however, there is just a daily service in each direction, which gives visitors to these two towns an hour or so in each location. This would not have been sufficient for my friend to have made the bus journeys to and from Grimsby Town station to see her brother. It is even worse in the other direction, as now it is impossible for people to go from Grimsby to Brigg and back in the day.

Is it any wonder that those of us in Lincolnshire read with envy of rail developments in Scotland, Wales or London?

Tim Mickleburgh, Boulevard Avenue, Grimsby DN31 2JP.
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Waiting for Tavistock

It is all very well having lots of chirping surrounding the opening of the second Okehampton station, but meanwhile its southerly neighbour Tavistock languishes in the still-not-reopened club – after nearly six decades!

This is despite false starts and false announcements over those years to get the five-mile link with Bere Alston reinstated so that hundreds of people could avoid the clogged up A386 five days a week twice a day. It would prove economically and environmentally a big improvement all round. I lived in the area for 12 years and had hopes of one day getting the train once more from Tavistock to Plymouth, but as usual the mandarins of Whitehall have other ideas. I am now in my 70s. It is no good me waiting another umpteen decades because I shall be on another platform!

Could local MPs and Devon County Council shove the Department for Transport to at least announce a timetable for the reopening?

Geoffrey Heathcock BEM JP, Queen Ediths Way, Cambridge
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Campaigning ideas

As always, *Railwatch* 189 contained plenty of useful and interesting news. I was particularly struck by the sensible and practical advice on using AI in campaigning.

A few points in articles made me think back and question the views expressed. For example:

Christian Wolmar laments the officious advice given to a friend at Winchester, warning him not to board an "earlier" train running late because his ticket would be invalid, and linking this to "30 years of privatisation".

I remember plenty of public sector employees who used to delight in being equally unhelpful, so I rather doubt there will be a huge culture change when we are all with "Great British Railways". In fact the station staff at Winchester were probably doing Christian's friend a service, as it would be the on-board staff who might have been unhelpfully inflexible.

Graham Larkbey's saga of obstruction and obfuscation over the station at Pilning is another reminder of the old public sector mindset echoing right through the privatised railway era. I am no fan of privatisation but it is not to blame for all our problems.

Meanwhile the report that, on the North Devon line, Crediton's usage figures leapt by 40% after the rail service was doubled in 2022 reminded me to ask if there are any instances at all of usage failing to meet or exceed forecasts when services have been improved or lines and stations have been reopened. There seems to be a pattern of demand always substantially exceeding forecasts. If so, could this pattern be exploited in campaigning?

Tony Farren
Brow Crescent, Windermere

Railcard anomaly

It has always struck me as somewhat of an anomaly that one can use a Network card to travel from Witham in Essex to Weymouth in Dorset, a distance of some 195 miles, yet not to Ipswich in Suffolk, approximately 35 miles away. There are many more examples, but this gives an example of the rather strange system in place.

Roger Smith, Station Mews, Station Road, Witham CM8 2FP

AGM questions

I chose to wait to see the report in *Railwatch* 189 on the AGM in Birmingham on 4 July before considering offering any comment.

Apart from the intermittent technical glitches (in past professional life I have sat in that room many times in seminars and the IT has never been perfect!) the presentations were all, in their own way, interesting and thought-provoking, with Ian Brown the outstanding winner in my humble opinion.

My only disappointment with the day was the "chairing". Times were not enforced and the over-run at the end, leaving little time for questions, did not seem to matter.

However, my biggest concern was that at the re-start after lunch Mr Wolmar was told that he had five minutes to introduce the afternoon session.....and took 45 (with no challenge from the chair) in which he managed to reference pretty well all his books and make some political asides. Surely his position, as I understand it, as a member of the Labour party, should have been declared, especially as Railfuture is non-party political?

This is not intended for one second as direct criticism of Mr Wolmar, with whom I have never had direct interaction, but more against what I see as too much leeway given just because of his status within Railfuture and his even greater status (rightly earned) as an author.

I am certain mine is the minority view, but on leaving the event I was definitely not the only person voicing similar concerns.

I look forward to next year's AGM but in the hope that the organisation may be reviewed

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Editor's note: Christian Wolmar is honorary president of Railfuture which means that he gives his very professional services, including writing for *Railwatch*, free. I feel he should be given a fair opportunity to inform members about his books and he does of course also already offer special prices to members. However, I expect the Railfuture board will consider how the AGM could be chaired more efficiently.

West London Orbital

Railfuture has long supported the idea of a passenger rail service in north-west London from the Midland main line to the Great Western line, using existing lines to create an 18 kilometre long missing link route.

Plans for a West London Orbital service every 15 minutes from Hendon to Hounslow as part of the London Overground network have been discussed for more than 10 years but have now been put out for public consultation by Transport for London. The consultation closed on 18 November.

TfL plans new Orbital stations at Neasden, Harlesden, Old Oak Common Lane and Lionel Road, plus new platforms at some existing stations.

The aim is to create alternatives to car use in a notoriously congested area and better links to Heathrow Airport while enabling new homes, new jobs and new infrastructure.

The £1 billion scheme includes two new platforms on the freight lines on the west side of Hendon station and new sidings west of Hounslow station. The sidings would allow Orbital trains to operate without affecting South Western or freight services. A decision on whether to go ahead with the project is expected next year with the first services starting in 2035. The scheme will boost the Park Royal and Old Oak Common areas ahead of the anticipated launch of HS2 in 2036. There has, however, been little apparent progress on Crossrail 2, a planned route from Hertfordshire to Surrey, despite the success of Crossrail 1 (the Elizabeth line) and the Department for Transport backing the idea in 2017. A study is reported to be under way into how much economic growth Crossrail 2 is capable of producing.



Graphic: Based on West London Alliance map



Picture: OXFORD CLARION

Clarion call for progress

Frustration is growing that the Oxford-Milton Keynes section of East West Rail is still not serving passengers. The stretch of rebuilt track was completed two years ago, but so far only freight and driver-training trains have operated.

The lack of progress has been faithfully recorded by the *Oxford Clarion*, a progressive news service keen to see public transport improvements and help for cyclists and pedestrians. In October, the *Clarion* announced: "We baked a train birthday cake to mark two years of no trains on East West Rail. Like the trains, the cake doesn't have a guard." An ongoing dispute about staff and safety cover on the trains has yet to be resolved, although there was speculation that a passenger service could start in December.

After a local campaign, Oxfordshire County Council has agreed to contribute £10 million to replace the London Road level crossing near Bicester Village station with a road underpass.

Start in the east for EWR: Page 11

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

Wessex

tony.smale@railfuture.org.uk

Get it fixed!



Tony Smale

The "small ideas initiative" has become something of a national crusade, and has been picked up by politicians. It turns the focus on to fixing the myriad small things that annoy people, such as unfathomable notices at station car parks about ways to pay for parking. Collectively, through local campaigns and contacts with rail managers, Railfuture has been addressing such problems over many years.

Lately Railfuture Wessex has taken the railway to task over small issues. A glaring example is Southern's persistent use of Gatwick Express liveried trains on the Southampton-Brighton service. We pointed out that station users at Southampton are misled by seeing a bright red Gatwick Express train at platform 2. Truth is, there has been no direct train to the airport since 2024. Please peel off those obsolete vinyls and – problem solved.

Another annoyance at Southampton: toilets on platform 1 were out of order for weeks and one of the lifts to the alternative toilets on platform 4 has also been out of use. Toilets are essential for all, especially the elderly and families with young children.

Meaningless on-board announcements are another source of irritation. How often do we hear: "I'll be walking through the train … " then no one appears? Travel queries go unanswered and fare evaders breathe a sigh of relief. Far from costing money, fixing this problem would actually generate income.

Another cost-saving suggestion Railfuture has made concerns travel during engineering works. When the Romsey-Eastleigh line was closed, forcing suspension of the Salisbury-Southampton stopping service, buses were provided for minor stations unaffected by the closure. Those stations could have been served by additional stops on other trains passing through.

Fixing the lack of luggage space on the class 444 trains that run to Weymouth and Portsmouth is something of a crusade for Railfuture Wessex. People heading for a flight from Heathrow or Southampton, or to cruise ships at Southampton docks, regularly block seats and gangways with huge suitcases. This is a source of anxiety for them and annoyance for everyone else. Since Covid, more people are working from home and growth in patronage has come from the leisure market. It is time to remove a few seats and fit proper luggage racks.

We will hammer away at the little things that annoy us. It all adds up to a world of difference for rail users!

www.facebook.com/WessexRailfuture/

Cymru

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Julian Langston

Influence

Railfuture was represented by Jessika Venn at the Welsh government's economy, energy and connectivity committee hearing in September. Evidence was submitted in advance, and nine organisations, including Railfuture, were represented at the transport section of the hearing.

We stressed that the railway in Wales must become boringly reliable, as well as rail and bus being properly integrated for timetabling and ticketing. We emphasised that railways massively benefit the economy. More use of them is cheaper than road expansion. We said carrying freight by rail rather than road means better energy efficiency and less pollution. We also noted that any track remodelling to improve speed or capacity should be done before or at the same time as electrification to avoid expensive future remediation. This applies particularly to the Cardiff-Swansea line.

There was a pleasantly broad consensus between the groups present, particularly on the need to remove barriers to travel by integrated ticketing and timetables, and for shifting freight to rail. A few times, other stakeholders used their time to back our priorities.

Pleasingly, there was little pushback from the committee members. Senedd member Janet Finch-Saunders (Conservative) asked us to focus on productivity and improving the economy.

The session was useful in making contacts. Leticia Gonzalez MS (Plaid Cymru) included us in the reconstituted cross-party group on public transport, which she chairs. Both Michael Whittaker from the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport and Robin Smith from the Rail Freight Group suggested we work with them on rail freight. We are responding positively to this.

Plaid Cymru lobbies Railfuture

Plaid Cymru, the minority ruling party in the Welsh Senedd, has written to Railfuture arguing for reopening of the rail spur linking Abertillery with the Ebbw Vale line at Aberbeeg. We replied saying we support the initiative, as evidenced in *Railwatch* 189. Plaid Cymru is also campaigning for a feasibility study to reopen a spur to Nelson from Ystrad Mynach, north of Caerphilly. This features in Railfuture's development plan, so we will watch the campaign with interest.



Picture: Cardiff Parkway Developments

£30 million on offer for Cardiff Parkway station. This computer-generated image shows the station to be built and operated by TfW and Network Rail. The original funding plan, which relied on private finance backed by car park income, has been scrapped

New Bristol-Wales service

Railfuture welcomes the go-ahead given by the Office of Rail and Road for TfW's new two-hourly service from West Wales to Bristol Temple Meads. We have been arguing for this for years. TfW said some services would originate from or extend to Fishguard or Milford Haven. While calling patterns will vary, stations such as Bridgend, Port Talbot Parkway, Neath, Swansea and Carmarthen could be served.

Great Western forum

Railfuture attended the online GWR forum in October. Subjects covered include the roll-out of bilingual announcements on GWR trains. By the time this issue of *Railwatch* is published, regional trains (when in Wales) should have announcements in English and Welsh. Inter-city trains should follow suit in May next year.

GWR is working with Transport for Wales on cross-compatibility between their contactless pay-as-you-go schemes. Currently the TfW scheme, available on the eastern part of the South Wales main line in Wales, is not accepted on GWR trains. CrossCountry accepts TfW's PAYG as far as Chepstow, the limit of the scheme. It is hoped software integration between the operators will allow seamless operation between GWR and TfW. In the meantime, GWR's Bristol area PAYG scheme will be extended to Wales, but only on GWR trains.

A proposed maintenance possession of Landore Viaduct in spring next year will cut rail access to Swansea from the east. Railfuture has asked why trains will be going west only as far as Port Talbot Parkway, when Neath is closer to Swansea.

Labour U-turn on the M4

Railfuture is disappointed that Labour has U-turned on previous commitments not to build a duplicate M4 motorway around Newport. Senedd Labour leader Ken Skates has said the situation is different now from 2019, when Labour committed to look at public transport alternatives. Labour joins the Conservatives and Reform in supporting the road, so it has majority support in the Senedd. This does not necessarily mean the Plaid Cymru minority government will adopt the scheme. It is not clear what this means for the proposed local services from Cardiff to Bristol and Cheltenham. Six new stations along the South Wales main line are part of this project, which were backed by former prime minister Keir Starmer who boasted in February of £1 billion being invested in Welsh rail. Since then, the UK has a new prime minister and Labour's Senedd administration lost power in Cardiff in May.

At the time of writing, GWR believes Magor & Undy and Cardiff Parkway will be the first to be built. In the November UK budget, Chancellor John Healey pledged £30 million funding for Cardiff Parkway.

The pledge was downplayed by Plaid Cymru transport minister Mark Hooper as "a tiny fraction" of the £1 billion needed – and earlier promised – to improve Welsh rail.

Professor Mark Barry, the "father" of the South Wales Metro, seems to agree. He wants to see a four trains per hour service on the Borderlands line, integrated with Merseyrail, together with speed and capacity upgrades on the North Wales main line.

He called for a start on detailed design and development work for the Swansea Bay Metro. Public consultation on the Metro proposals closes on 13 December.

He also argues for a vertically integrated and simplified rail ecosystem, with the proposed Great British Railways Cymru being fully devolved and aligned with Transport for Wales.

Green for go: New station for new town



Pictures: SPENCER RAIL ENGINEERING

NOVEMBER START: Stakeholders gathered for a ground-breaking ceremony to mark the start of construction on the new station at Waterbeach on the Cambridge to Ely line. Councillor Brian Milnes, chair of the Greater Cambridge Partnership (fifth from left), cut the first sod, flanked by Councillor Tim Bick (second from left) and Justin Hopkins, managing director of Spencer Rail Engineering (fourth from right)

Work started in November on a £28 million station at Waterbeach, north of Cambridge, where the population is expected to double with 11,000 extra homes in a designated new town.

Spencer Rail Engineering is responsible for both the detailed design and construction of the station, which will include two fully accessible platforms, a footbridge, lifts, and improved integration with walking, cycling and buses.

The project is being jointly funded by Homes England and the Greater Cambridge Partnership, which brings together Cambridgeshire County Council, Cambridge City Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council, the University of Cambridge and the Combined Authority Business Board.

Planning approval has been given for the first phase of the expansion of Waterbeach, with up to 4,500 homes given the green light.
A condition of the planning approval was for a new station was built on the Cambridge to Ely line.

Spencer Rail Engineering is the principal contractor, delivering the detailed design and build of the station.

Spencer Rail Engineering managing director Justin Hopkins said: "Reaching this milestone has taken a great deal of hard work from everyone involved, and it is a real moment to see spades in the ground." Partnership chair Brian Milnes said: "This is about more than a station. We are delivering a new travel hub with park and ride facilities, a new busway and the Waterbeach Greenway route. Together we are providing sustainable and convenient ways for people to travel, not only in Waterbeach but across Greater Cambridge."



Computer-generated image of the new Waterbeach station

The existing Waterbeach station will remain open until the new station is operational, but Railfuture East Anglia believes there is a good case for keeping it open alongside the new one, which is 2.4 kilometres north.

"Relocation" obscures an important distinction. Building a new station and closing an existing one are separate decisions, with closure needing justification under the Railways Act 2005.

A Waterbeach parish council survey attracted more than 1,300 responses and suggested that closure could lead to fewer rail journeys, with some people switching to cars. Respondents highlighted the distance from much of the existing village and difficulties for older and disabled passengers, young people and those without cars. The survey has valuable evidence about accessibility and likely changes in travel.

The published business case does not settle the issue. Its benefit-cost ratio of 3.65 assesses the relocation scheme against a scenario broadly retaining existing arrangements. It does not establish whether closing the current station offers better value than keeping both stations.

The existing platforms have also been extended to accommodate eight-car trains, removing an advantage previously claimed for the new station. Waterbeach recorded around 372,000 passenger entries and exits in 2024-25.

Railfuture has proposed examining whether services terminating at Cambridge North could be extended to the new station, calling at Waterbeach village en route. The case for closure must be tested against its consequences for passengers, communities and sustainable travel.

How to give East West Rail a bump start from the east

Construction of the Bedford-Cambridge phase of East West Rail should start in Cambridge.

Railfuture East Anglia believes construction should start as soon as possible, and not wait for delayed other sections to be completed.

Works would include doubling the track towards Newmarket, rebuilding Cambridge station with additional platforms and an eastern entrance, and upgrading track layouts and signalling between Shepreth Branch Junction and Cambridge North.

To maintain services during the resulting disruption, we want a turnback platform at Waterbeach New Town station and changes at Cambridge North.

Meanwhile, the grade-separated junction at Hauxton, the tunnels and Cambourne station should proceed in parallel. This could allow electric services between Newmarket and Cambourne before the entire route to Bedford is complete.

Railfuture also advocates extending the railway towards Tempsford, with a new St Neots East Parkway station.

East West Rail's Stuart Ratcliffe-Jones was scheduled to speak at Railfuture East Anglia's Cambridge meeting on 28 November.

Reconstruction at Bedford, alongside provision for the proposed Universal Studios development, could take considerable time. Starting work in the east concurrently would avoid unnecessary delays and bring benefits to passengers sooner. East West Rail is seen as a catalyst to stimulate economic growth and has the potential to add £78 billion of value to the economy over the next decade, but the completed Oxford-Bletchley section is still waiting for passenger services to start.

There is speculation, however, that a passenger service could start in December.

Since Chiltern Railways was nationalised in September, driver training runs have increased to 24 trips a day using class 196 units running between Milton Keynes Central and Oxford.

China noses into Europe's rail future festival

If you want to see the latest in rail technology, you have to go to Berlin's InnoTrans. In September, Railfuture's policy director Ian Brown went to the show with Jerry Alderson, who is studying European Union plans to replace over 20 different control systems in member countries by implementing the European Rail Traffic Management System. InnoTrans could be described as a festival for a rail future. It is held every two years and has 3,190 exhibitors from 59 countries displaying their wares in 26 exhibition halls and an outdoor multitrack area. Most of the 175,000 visitors arrived by S-Bahn train (Schnellbahn) at dedicated stations, with travel included in the ticket price.

By Ian Brown

This was Railfuture's third visit to InnoTrans and, before visiting the exhibition, we sampled public transport in three nearby cities – Dresden, Leipzig and Erfurt – to look at their transport networks.

All three cities have extensive integrated rail-based transport systems.

We travelled by train using the easy-to-use flexible Interrail pass.

With the German rail network becoming increasingly congested, we used a new international service from Berlin to Dresden.

Running at high frequency from Copenhagen via Hamburg, Berlin and Dresden to Prague, the service uses ComfortJet trains (operated by the Czech national railway company) which are similar to Austria's RailJet trains.

The locomotive-hauled fixed-formation trains have full Czech-style facilities, including a restaurant, plus a bar serving draught ale. The loco was a Siemens Vectron, which can cross national borders without needing a loco change. The European Union has embarked on a pilot scheme to develop new international rail connections. This is the first, launched as recently as June this year. Overall journey time is about 12 hours, so operational quality will be critical as these trains can be used by passengers within national borders as well as people travelling Europe-wide. Air operators such as Ryanair have already exploited this "cabotage" market.

Picture: IAN BROWN



IS THIS THE FUTURE? Chinese rail manufacturer CRRC showed off its VELLINK, the prototype for a fully autonomous SmartMetro. Because there is no driver's front cab, passengers get unobstructed, panoramic views through the front window. The driver's console is hidden until human intervention is needed. The AI system processes data to monitor track conditions, detect line changes and plan driving logistics. Built at Changchun, car bodies are made from advanced ultralight materials to make the train 18% lighter and 10% more energy-efficient than traditional metro models

Picture: DB



Czech, German and Danish flags at the June ceremony to launch the new direct EuroCity service. A similar service is planned to link Oslo, Gothenburg, Malmö, Copenhagen, Hamburg and Berlin

Also introducing new services is FlixTrain, the open access operator which uses the successful FlixBus model.

FlixBus does not own buses but contracts local bus operators. FlixBus operates the booking system and promotes international routes such as Paris-London.

Flixbus has built up a large client base and now uses trains on high-volume routes such as Hamburg-Berlin, the same route used by the ComfortJet.

Until recently, rail operators in Europe have focused on high speed operations, very popular in themselves but leaving the growing market for cheap travel wide open.

Picture: IAN BROWN



Contrast in Leipzig: On the right is a modern low-floor accessible light rail vehicle. On left is a 65-year-old Soviet style Tatra high-floor tram. It is, however, dragging a modern low-floor accessible trailer behind it

In France, national rail operator SNCF has realised this and now provides a high-volume, no-frills service on key routes using a mixture of modern duplex TGVs on Paris to the south of France, competing with its own InOui trains. SNCF now operates a conventional high-frequency international Paris-Brussels service taking about five hours, competing on price with its own Eurostar trains taking two hours. With a tentative approach to night trains such as Brussels-Berlin (where the economics are more difficult), it would appear European railways have woken up to the fact that there are huge markets for leisure travel, both internal long-distance and international travel. Like most cities in Germany, those that we visited – Dresden, Leipzig and Erfurt – have verkehrsverbund (VB) or regional transport organisations, akin to Transport for London.

The VBs are responsible for planning, bringing together all regional transport services (public and private) and fares.

This includes regional and S-Bahn (city) rail services operated by the national railway or by private concessions on the national rail network.

Railfuture advocates this approach for devolved authorities in Britain. The result is an easy-to-use, integrated transport system with simple value-for-money zonal fares and day passes aimed at persuading car drivers to use public transport.

Buses act as feeders in these cities, with trams and rail providing the core. Result: High loadings.

The public transport network enhances the urban realm rather than detracting from it.

All three cities we visited operate accessible trams. All new light rail vehicles are low-floor level-access multi-segment trams. These have largely replaced the old Soviet style Tatra T3 style trams in the former East Germany. The Tatras are a "no no" for wheelchairs, pushchairs, luggage and less active older people.

Leipzig VB has addressed this in a cost-effective way by providing low-floor trailers for the older trams which have been fitted with modern electronic passenger information screens. They may look rather odd but the result is a fully accessible network.

Developments at InnoTrans

Back in Berlin we recalled that, on previous visits in 2022 and 2024, the accent was on designing trains and light rail vehicles with improved access to meet accessibility legislation, with many examples on display. This has continued with further examples of provision for cycles, now established as part of city transport.

The world has moved on, with multi-mode traction designed to make maximum use of electrified networks. Many regional and local passenger trains on display were both electric and battery powered.

On earlier visits we saw electric and diesel bimodes, but now diesel has been superseded by batteries. The aim is to maximise use of electrified networks by operating through services beyond the wires. Hydrogen as a source of sustainable, no-emissions power was represented by an EU partnership with Stadler to produce the world's first hydrogen train for narrow gauge lines in Europe, starting with Sardinia.

There were many multi-system, multi-mode locomotives on display for use by national operators and the many open-access freight companies in Europe. Stadler's class 99 bimode locomotive displayed in 2024, is now in regular service on intermodal trains between three terminals in the West Midlands and Thamesport. The continuing trend is to add batteries and more multi-system availability. Much freight is international, and rail needs a go-anywhere capability to match a lorry.

Picture: IAN BROWN



THIS IS THE FUTURE: Siemens displayed London Transport's new walk-through, air-conditioned Piccadilly line train. The first of the 94 ordered trains enter service this month. Some cars have no wheels at all, a technique now used in many light rail multi-segment trains

Picture: FLIXTRAIN



OPEN ACCESS CHALLENGER: Publicity picture showing Talgo's new 230 train for FlixTrain. On show at InnoTrans was a 230 carriage

A surprise from Talgo

Spanish manufacturer Talgo exhibited a shared-bogie car for the new FlixTrain 230 high-speed train. FlixTrain has options for 65 train sets, costing £2 billion!

Automated control

The ultimate level of automatic operation (European Train Control System) is being used on Line 14 of the Paris Metro in a self contained closed environment. At future InnoTrans exhibitions, we can expect to see many more examples of digitally controlled autonomous Metro trains, such as the prototype *VELLINK* from China.

■ *Ian Brown CBE is chair of Railfuture's European Passenger Group*

Picture: IAN BROWN



Dedicated area for cycles in a modern German S-Bahn vehicle on display at Innotrans

Public transport is inaccessible to millions of deaf people – RNID

davidpennierail21@gmail.com

A new Bradford station



David Pennie

Railfuture welcomes government backing for a "transformative" new Bradford station, on the site of Bradford Interchange. Nevertheless, some important questions need answering during the next year when more detailed options are worked through. The government says the station will be "at the heart of Northern Powerhouse Rail" but the announcement raises many questions for Railfuture and other campaigners.

The site of the present Interchange is well situated for the city centre and shares the site with the bus station, facilitating interchange. But it has not yet been decided whether it will be a through station or a rebuilt turnback station on the same site, possibly with extra platforms and better passenger facilities. A through "crossrail" style station is clearly beneficial, but how can the site accommodate it? It cannot be on the footprint of the current station because there is no scope there for a through station, and surely closing the present station before a new one is opened cannot be considered. The bus station must also remain so that it is easy to change from bus to train. Tram connectivity is mentioned, but Bradford is still awaiting the tram scheme being given its long overdue go-ahead. Railfuture is hoping the government gives the tram scheme speedy approval so that trams reach Bradford before the new station.

Upgrades are promised between Leeds, Sheffield and York, with the government aiming to create a network of frequent "turn up and go" services. These will be most welcome, but where will they serve? Will Huddersfield be included? Between Bradford and Manchester, what will be the mix of express, semi-fast and stopping services? Railfuture wants improved train services from where people live, so will there also be improved services to places currently only having one train an hour to Bradford, such as Mytholmroyd and Sowerby Bridge? It is vital for Bradford that it becomes easier for people living in villages and small towns to gain access for work and cultural activities. Will the scheme include direct services between Bradford, Halifax, Barnsley and Sheffield, avoiding Leeds?

Will the Calder Valley line be upsignalled to enable more frequent and faster services to Manchester, or is the Northern Powerhouse Rail-promoted new line between Bradford and Huddersfield part of the project? Such a line could prove expensive and environmentally destructive. We do not want another HS2 fiasco!

Electrification between Leeds and Bradford is planned, but what about further west along the Calder Valley? All these issues need resolving by transport secretary Heidi Alexander, West Yorkshire mayor Tracy Brabin and Bradford Council.



Picture: ALSTOM

GRAPHIC PREVIEW: TPE's new electric+battery train imagined in a future York station setting

Railfuture regional alliance

Sheffield is a crucial rail hub important to three Railfuture branches – Yorkshire, East Midlands and Lincolnshire. So a joint meeting of the three branches was held at Sheffield Hallam University in October and heard from Kevin Towle, rail development manager with South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. The track layout at Sheffield and a 15mph speed limit are known problems. Increased use of three-car trains will require either additional platforms or better use of existing platforms, but ideally all platforms need to be longer. Available space is limited by tram tracks, the inner ring road and tunnels at each end of the station. The combined authority is now coordinating industry attempts to improve the situation.

Anne Robinson, from Hope Valley Climate Action, spoke about the "mini-Switzerland" project being developed in the Hope Valley area of the Peak District to create better integrated public transport. A three-year trial is planned, with the new services expected next year.

Use of the Hope Valley line has trebled in 20 years, leading to overcrowding, but there are also problems with bus timetable changes causing problems for interchange passengers.

Railfuture members believe "mini-Switzerland" ideas could also be implemented in the Calder Valley.

TPE's new battery train future

TransPennine Express has signed a £1 billion contract for a 29-strong fleet of bimode trains, which will be designed and built by Alstom in Derby. Delivery will start in 2032 and will include maintenance by Alstom. The 110mph long-distance regional fleet is a key part of the wider Transpennine Route Upgrade, which should improve rail services for Liverpool, Manchester, York, Hull, Scarborough and Saltburn. Rapid charging equipment will be installed at turn-around points including Hull, Scarborough, and Saltburn. Alstom's Adessia Stream train will be designed for level boarding, and the five-car trains will each have two toilets. The trains will be owned by Rock Rail (backed by Barclays Bank), which will lease them to TPE.

MPs have welcomed the "electric trains for Hull". Battery electric trains will be good, but not as good as electrification proper to Hull. Railfuture does not want the advent of these trains to postpone indefinitely the solution that Hull really needs – full electrification.

New rail user group

Cuts to rail services on the Doncaster-Scunthorpe line following Covid prompted the set-up of a new rail user group, straddling the borders of South Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire. The Doncaster–Scunthorpe Rail User Group is campaigning for the restoration of an hourly service and is trying to recruit supporters in Thorne, Hatfield and Kirk Sandall. Contact Ann Hindley: ann@hindley.gn.apc.org or 01724 710819.

Newcastle-Brighton hopes

Open-access operator Grand Central has been waiting for a year for Office of Rail and Road approval to run a Newcastle-Brighton service via Darlington, York, Birmingham, Oxford, Reading and Gatwick but agreed in October to lease four class 180 Adelante units from Angel Trains for the service.

www.railfuture.org.uk/Yorkshire+Branch

Railfuture Yorkshire Facebook: ***www.facebook.com/groups/3116771821782626/***

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High hopes for 75% rail freight growth

By Ray King

Rail freight grew by a modest 1%, compared to last year in the latest quarterly figures. The growth coincided with the new Labour government led by Andy Burnham setting long-term targets to expand the amount of freight going by rail.

It wants rail freight to grow by 40% by 2040 and 75% by 2050.

For many years, successive governments have failed to respond to public demand to get more freight going by rail.

Over the past four and half years the volume of rail freight has actually fallen, although in the first half of 2026 it started to grow again.

If the new Labour government can maintain that growth, it hopes the volume of rail freight will grow from 4,000 mega tonnes a quarter to nearly 6,000 in 2040 and nearly 8,000 in 2050.

Transport secretary Heidi Alexander said: "Great British Railways will have a clear mission to help grow our economy by moving more of the goods British businesses rely on.

"Our new target gives the rail freight industry the certainty it needs to invest, helping businesses move more products, deliver the materials needed to build new homes and infrastructure, and support jobs across the country."

A few months before losing the general election in 2024, Rishi Sunak's government set a target of 75% rail freight growth by 2050. The start of growth failed to materialise under his and Keir Starmer's government.

Freightliner, at that time, said the government should plan to boost rail freight by 300% by 2050.

"Increasing the role of freight on the railway is not just good for economic growth," said Network Rail chief executive Jeremy Westlake.

"It reduces congestion on our roads, cuts carbon emissions and supports our ambition to build a cleaner, more resilient transport system. We fully support the government's target."

Freightliner's Chris Lawrenson said: "We see the 2040 target as a floor, not a ceiling. It is an ambitious target, but one we believe rail freight can surpass if government and industry work together over the coming years to create the framework needed to unlock growth."

Rail Freight Group's Maggie Simpson said: "There are huge opportunities for moving more goods by rail and the sector stands ready to fulfil government's bold targets for growth, making an even stronger contribution to the nation's productivity, development and resilience." Supermarket company Tesco runs 110 trains a week (with rail freight operator DRS) which are estimated to remove 250,000 lorry journeys from the road each year.

Tesco is also investigating ways of bringing supplies from Europe into its rail operations.

Separate from the Tesco operation, there are three main container ports. On average, London Gateway on the Thames estuary has 46 freight trains a day, Felixstowe (Suffolk) 60 trains a day and Southampton 32 trains a day.

Work began in November on a £1 billion expansion at London Gateway to create a second rail terminal, which is expected to increase the number of trains next year to 80 a day. London Gateway, owned by a Dubai-based company led by Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, has offered to contribute millions of pounds to get the three-mile-long branch line from Thames Haven Junction electrified. Experts say the cost of electrification could be around £15 million, much lower than previously thought.

If the branch line was electrified, class 90 electric locos could be used to reduce dependence on the ubiquitous class 66 diesel locomotives. The government seems to be avoiding making decisions about electrification by embracing the use of class 99 Stadler bimode locos, which have impressive performance but are inherently less efficient with the added weight of a diesel engine.

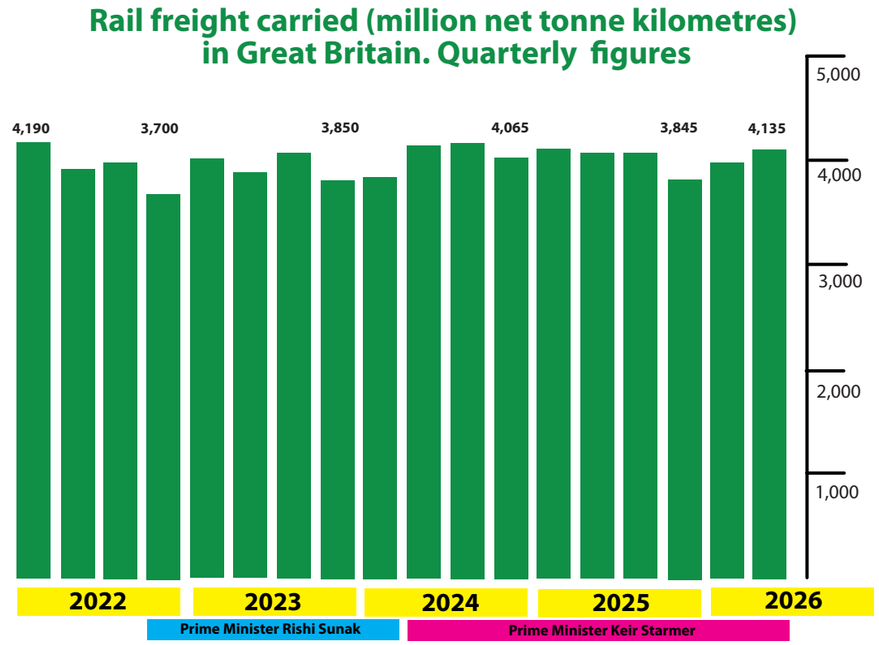
Railfuture is calling for more electrification of key freight routes, and power supply upgrades on those routes where electrification does exist.

The Israeli/American war on Iran has pushed up the price of diesel for road hauliers and may provide an incentive for government and industry to encourage more rail freight – by far the most energy-efficient and environmentally friendly mode.

Moving a unit load by rail emits barely a quarter of the emissions associated with moving the same load by road, even using diesel locomotives.

Rail freight also plays an indispensable role in our daily lives. The slippers we put on, the kettles we boil, the clothes we wear and the food and drink we consume were all carried by rail at some stage in their journey to our homes. Rail serves 100% of the population every day. Even the most avid motorist uses automotive parts (transported by rail) and drives on roads built and maintained using rail-borne aggregates.

Network Rail is currently preparing strategic advice on the three main lines affected by the decision to cancel sections of HS2. The interventions necessary to accommodate future growth will cost us much more than if Britain had stuck to the original plan for HS2.



SLOW PROGRESS: Based on Office of Rail and Road figures



Picture: FREIGHTLINER

Freightliner unveiled its new livery in November on a class 90 locomotive at Crewe, where it was built by British Rail in 1990. The loco was formerly owned by DB Cargo until 2024. Freightliner, which describes itself as the UK's largest maritime intermodal logistics operator, was acquired by the French shipping group CMA CGM Group in January. Freightliner's parent company was previously Genesee & Wyoming (G&W) and its former heavy haul business now operates independently as Heavy Haul Rail

Golborne strikes gold with new station

Work has started on a new station to bring trains back to Golborne in Wigan, after more than 60 years.

The new station will be served by an hourly service between Wigan and Stalybridge via Manchester Victoria, helping to reduce journey times into Manchester city centre by up to 30 minutes and making it easier to get on to Manchester's Bee Network by connecting to bus, tram and active travel routes.

The station is set to open in 2028 and will ease road congestion, reduce emissions and improve the town itself, with a footbridge across the tracks linking parts of the town previously cut off by the rail line.

Visiting the site in September, Greater Manchester mayor Bev Craig, Andy Burnham's successor, said: "People in Golborne have been crying out for better transport links. We have listened and we are building a brand-new train station.

"It is a big moment for Greater Manchester too. Our first new train station in more than 25 years. I can't wait to board the first trains stopping here."

Golborne-based engineering firm Murphy is constructing the station, where train services are expected to start by spring 2028. Jamie Rothwell of Murphy said: "Golborne has been our North West home for many years, so we are honoured to be awarded the Golborne station project and support Transport for Greater Manchester's ambitions to improve transport infrastructure for the local community." Councillor Nazia Rehman, leader of Wigan Council, said: "After years of planning and partnership working, it is fantastic to see these plans becoming a reality. " Jo Platt, MP for Leigh and Atherton, said: "Back in 2019, I kick-started a petition calling for the reopening of Golborne railway station, building on years of dedicated campaigning by local residents, councillors and former Greater Manchester mayor, now prime minister, Andy Burnham. It is now incredibly encouraging to see this long-held ambition finally beginning to take shape."

In Liverpool city region, four new stations are planned. Liverpool Baltic will be the first, followed by stations for Carr Mill (St Helens), Daresbury (Halton) and Woodchurch on the Wirral. Mayor Steve Rotheram said: "I want to bring the benefits of our fantastic Merseyrail network to more people and places, including communities that have been cut off from those opportunities for too long."



Picture: TRANSPORT for GREATER MANCHESTER

ON SITE: (from left) TfGM's rail network director Simon Elliott, Wigan Council leader Nazia Rehman, Greater Manchester mayor Bev Craig, Northern's managing director Tricia Williams and Murphy's transportation managing director Jamie Rothwell

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Northern deal on Sunday trains

Up to 80 extra trains could run on Sundays after a November deal between operator Northern and the RMT union. The agreement will bring an end to the "longest-running industrial dispute on the railway" over Sunday working for conductors. It follows the "Northern struggles on a Sunday" article in *Railwatch* 189 (October 2026). The restoration of Sunday services will be phased to ensure Northern can deliver the changes reliably, and it is expected to boost revenue by around £4 million a year.

Cheadle'new station

Work started in October on a new station for Cheadle which will be served by trains from Manchester Piccadilly to Chester, via Stockport and Altrincham. The Mid Cheshire Rail Users Association is calling for the existing service to be doubled to two trains an hour, but the association is worried that the additional stop at Cheadle will create reliability problems. Discussions between Stockport Council and operator Northern are continuing. Railfuture North West is supportive of the association and wants to see the plans for two trains per hour come to fruition.

Direct gains and losses

Stations between Manchester Airport and Crewe could lose some of their trains to Manchester Piccadilly because of a new direct service to Manchester Airport from Birmingham planned by London North Western Railway. The new service is expected to take over all paths of Northern's Manchester Piccadilly-Manchester Airport services from May next year.

Wrexham-Bidston reliability alert

The Wrexham-Bidston Rail Users Association (WBRUA) is concerned that Transport for Wales, which runs services along their line, amended its "leaf fall timetable" based on flawed data – before more reliable new trains were introduced on the route.

MPs back Skipton-Colne petition

MPs and councillors from across the political spectrum helped launch a petition calling for the reopening of the 12-mile railway between Colne and Skipton. The Skipton East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership is calling on ministers to support efforts to reinstate the "missing link", axed in 1970.

Recent SELRAP recruit George Fry (20) from Trawden, a former pupil of Park High School, Colne, said: "For young people without a car in East Lancashire, getting to Yorkshire is a real struggle.

"Having a car should not be a necessity to make a success of our lives. The Colne-Skipton reopening would be transformational, not just for young people." The petition was launched at Thornton Hall Country Park, straddling the Lancashire/ Yorkshire border, close to the route of the old line.

Local MPs along the route Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe), Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) and Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) added their support, along with the mayors of Pendle (Nadeem Ahmed), Skipton (Winston Feather) and Hyndburn (Noordad Aziz).

You can sign the petition at: ***https://c.org/B9mGvW9LMg***

Edge Hill university survey

The Ormskirk, Preston and Southport Travellers' Association has linked up with the Business School at Edge Hill University to develop an online travel survey.

OPSTA is a long-established campaign group which uses an evidence-based approach in its work with MPs, local authorities, the rail industry and other transport groups. Passenger counts and surveys are essential to show demand for services, travel needs and patterns of use.

OPSTA is keen to hear from residents in south-west Lancashire, north Liverpool City Region and the metropolitan borough of Wigan about their most important journey using all means of transport. The more wide-ranging the data, the stronger the case becomes for better public transport. You can take part in the anonymous survey via the website:



www.opsta.org

Manchester Airport upgrade

Work begins in December on a £115 million upgrade at Manchester Airport station. Platforms are being extended, with improvements to signalling and the track layout.

Crewe station closure

A "multi-million pound" upgrade is imminent at Crewe station, which will be closed for nine days from 13 February.

Bruce survives Delay Repay torture

By Bruce Williamson

My adventures travelling from Portrush, Northern Ireland, to Bristol by ferry and train last year may be recalled by readers (*Railwatch* 185).

My journey home after doing a job in connection with the Open golf tournament was uncomfortable and often annoying.

This July the event moved to Southport, between Liverpool and Blackpool, and once my work was done I walked to the nearest station, Hillside, to get the train home.

Cancellation No 1

The first leg took me to Liverpool Central with no delays. I then had to get to nearby Lime Street. I was expecting plenty of prominent signage for pedestrians, but I could not see any. I had to use my smartphone maps app to show me the way. When I got to Lime Street, the train I was intending to catch was cancelled.

The National Rail app recommended getting the next train to Liverpool South Parkway (10 minutes, on time) and then a train to Birmingham New Street. This one was slightly late but got me to New Street in plenty of time to catch the 1812 to Temple Meads, getting in at 1935 which is when the "fun" began.



My disputed ticket: West Midlands Trains and GWR brushed me off



Routine cancellations: Maybe worth snapping to prove a point

Walking home thoughts

My final connection, the 1946 Great Western train to Lawrence Hill, was cancelled. The next train was more than an hour later. It was also cancelled and was the last train of the day, so I could not complete my journey.

As I walked home, I had time to think about a refund via Delay Repay, the national rail scheme that compensates you if your train journey is delayed or cancelled.

I thought it would be an absolute black-and-white slam dunk for a full refund, right? Wrong.

I do not routinely photograph departure boards and log departure and arrival times like an alert trainspotter, but this experience makes me wish I had.

My claim was not delayed

The next day (no delay on my part!) I applied to GWR for Delay Repay, as its final two trains were cancelled and I felt it was their fault I could not complete the journey that day.

On the last day of July, I got an email from GWR: "Please accept our apologies for the delay in processing your claim".

A speedy rejection of my claim

On 3 August. GWR sent me an email rejecting my claim.

"We have checked the journey you have claimed for and our records show that this service was operated by another train operator (West Midlands Trains). Therefore, we are unable to process your claim". This was not much of an explanation.

GWR went on: "We have forwarded your claim to West Midlands Trains. The train operator, West Midlands Trains, will be in touch with you directly with further information about any compensation that may be due."

Well, I thought, this is annoying, but if GWR are not going to pay, West Midlands Trains must, surely?

WMT had 'no record of claim'

Two weeks later, I had not heard from WMT, so I telephoned them to find out whether the claim had actually been forwarded. I was told there was no record of my claim, and was advised to email with details of my journey, which I did on 17 August.

On 31 August, I got a message from WMT: "Thank you for contacting us. I am sorry we have not yet been in touch with a response".

I had not heard anything by 14 September so I phoned WMT again. After five minutes on hold, I spoke to someone who said it would be all right. The next day, however, I got an email saying the claim had been denied because it was all GWR's fault and it had been sent back to GWR.

On 16 September, I tried contacting GWR via its online web chat. After I explained, the operative gave me a long explanation of train times, etc. While I was checking the details against my notes, the chat timed out before I was able to dispute the information. He claimed that one of the trains that I actually travelled on was cancelled.

So I had to start another chat and go back to square one. This time the operative was much less helpful, leaving me angry and frustrated. He would not give me the information that the previous chat operative had obtained, and basically said "appeal", even though that was not possible since, through no fault of mine, the deadline had passed.

I was advised to appeal

On the same day, I tried phoning WMT. A very helpful man talked me through the actual and timetabled trains, and advised me that the first operator of a delayed or cancelled train on my journey is usually the one who takes the blame and refunds me. That was WMT, even though GWR cancelled the final trains. I was advised to appeal, which I did.

The WMT website has a page where you can type in your appeal. My appeal was pretty much everything in this article up to this point, which took some time to type. When I clicked "submit", it timed out, and I had to log in again. It reloaded the page and wiped out all my typing!

GWR gets its dates wrong

WMT forwarded my claim back to GWR, who emailed me on 19 September: Claim unsuccessful. The reason? "The ticket provided is not valid for the journey you've claimed for" despite the fact that I used it for four different trains and it got me through numerous ticket barriers.

Then I noticed that GWR has got the date wrong. They have put: "Travel Date: Sat, 11 Jul 2026" when it was Sunday 12. So I clicked the appeal link and typed an explanation.

On the next page I saw that the incorrect travel date was automatically filled in the travel details, so I needed to change that. But the system did not allow me to type in the correct date because: "Claims can only be made for journeys that took place within the previous 28 days", despite the fact that I originally applied within one day.

I could not go forward because it would not accept the correct date, and I did not want to confuse the issue further by entering a false date. So I tried to reload the page, as the wrong date initially appeared without an error. Of course this took me back to square one and my typing had been erased. Try again, without correcting the date. No dice.

How helpful was the helpline?

So I tried phoning the GWR helpline which said that they were going to log it as a complaint, and asked me for the journey details. I offered to email them as I had already typed them out and it would be easier than dictating over the phone. Their operative gave me an email address and advised me to write a complaint, which I did on 28 September.

I received a reply on 7 October claiming that I could not have made the connection and travelled on the train that I actually did travel on, and that therefore I would have got the later train to Lawrence Hill which was delayed by only three minutes. Therefore I had no claim.

As GWR later admitted, the later train was cancelled, and had I stayed to wait for the next train it would have been the next day, or in other words a delay of about eight hours. Therefore, I argued, I am entitled to a refund.

I responded on 12 October pointing out the mistake and GWR replied the same day, agreeing that the last train was indeed cancelled, and asking how I eventually got home.

The next day (three months after my journey), customer support got back to me and said that they would hand the details over to their Delay Repay department.

Unable to refund

Also on that day, WMT got back to me: "We have been unable to approve your claim as the train that delayed your journey was not one of ours. The train was operated by Great Western Railway. As they operated the first delayed service, they are responsible for processing your claim. We have sent full details of your claim to the customer relations team at Great Western Railway."

So the farcical merry-go-round continued.Is there a happy ending? On 20 October, GWR finally refunded me, 100 days after my journey. Should Delay Repay really be this difficult?

East Anglia

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Paul Hollinghurst

Fen line in 'freefall'

Deep railway problems were exposed by disruption to the Fen line during the summer. There were recurring train faults and failures affecting signalling, track circuits, level crossings and points. Lurking out of sight for most of the time are long-standing problems with investment and the maintenance of ageing infrastructure. The Fen Line Users Association has been tracking and recording these problems – and campaigning for improvements. Between June and August, train operator Great Northern recorded nearly 840 cancellations on services scheduled to start or finish at King's Lynn or Ely, disrupting thousands of journeys. Commuters lost wages and had the expense of driving to Peterborough for alternative trains to London. The problems are highlighted in FLUA's September newsletter with the headline: "Fen Line services in freefall".

Overhead line equipment has been a major source of trouble. Faulty or missing droppers have damaged pantograph carbon strips, at one point leaving 19 of 26 units out of service. Extreme temperatures caused wires to sag and also destabilised the peat trackbed. Class 379 trains, reintroduced in May 2025 after being stored for four years, have also suffered brake and coupling faults, failed air conditioning and onboard safety problems. Spare-parts and train-crew shortages have compounded the difficulties. The crisis was exemplified on 3 August, when a contact wire tangled around the pantograph of a King's Cross-King's Lynn train just north of Cambridge station. The resulting electrical trip affected services from Ely and Cambridge North through Cambridge to Cambridge South and towards Shepreth Branch Junction. Passengers were stranded for hours as trains were moved and damaged wiring isolated. Even diesel-operated CrossCountry services took hours to resume at Cambridge North. Contradictory platform displays and inaccurate online updates added to passenger frustration. Following pressure from local MPs, including West Norfolk's James Wild, GN and GBR Anglia issued apologies. A temporary speed-restricted timetable was followed on 8 September by a joint Fen line action plan promising improvements. However, September saw 320 cancellations, 40 more than in August.



Picture: SIZEWELL C

Regular freight trains have started running overnight from Derbyshire to the Suffolk coast as construction of the nuclear power station at Sizewell C gets under way. Each train carries 1,000 tonnes of aggregates via the seven-mile-long upgraded branch line from Saxmundham via Leiston to Sizewell. The line closed to passengers 60 years ago but trains carrying nuclear flasks from the original Sizewell A and B power stations continued to use it.

Now the route is being promoted as the Green Rail Route, with trains running at low speed to minimise the effect on people living nearby. The East Suffolk line from Ipswich to Saxmundham has also been upgraded to allow material delivered by ship to continue its journey to Sizewell by rail. The aim is for 60% of construction material for Sizewell C to be delivered by rail. The nuclear power station is expected to be completed in the late 2030s, providing energy for some six million homes. There are now new junctions at Leiston East and Leiston West, connecting to purpose-built freight facilities. A new yard will handle initial deliveries, while a second facility near the power station site has long sidings for trains carrying up to 2,000 tonnes of stone. Other expected traffic includes cement, steel and tunnel segments manufactured at Avonmouth for the project's temporary desalination plant.

Railfuture East Anglia wants this investment to leave a legacy for Suffolk's railway network, with, for example, a longer loop at Wickham Market. We also want to see passenger services introduced between Ipswich and Leiston, which has a population of around 6,000.

FLUA was invited to a performance seminar in November. Railfuture East Anglia urges affected passengers to contact their MPs. Sustained pressure is needed to turn promises into reliable services.

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Bruce Williamson



John Henderson

Lawrence Hill lift

Work has started at Lawrence Hill station, on the Severn Beach line, to make the station more accessible. Every year, almost 300,000 passengers use the station, which is currently accessed via two staircases from Lawrence Hill Road. There is an alternative step-free entrance to Platform 1.
A temporary footbridge is being installed so the steps on platform 2 can be demolished to make way for a lift and an improved stairway.

Railfuture at GWR event

Railfuture Severnside secretary John Henderson joined a Teams call with Great Western Railway for one of the train operator's twice yearly stakeholder conferences. Despite a forecast of another challenging budget in 2027, there was some good news at the October event. First, GWR announced retrenchment from last year's savage Sunday cuts. There was also the nationally significant news that GWR is making progress with two business cases for new trains. One is for a fleet of new battery electric suburban trains, and a separate case for the necessary charging infrastructure. Railfuture hopes to get more details soon.

In December, Railfuture Severnside is celebrating the lifting of request-stop status from Dilton Marsh. Railfuture's affiliate West Wilts rail user group has run a long campaign to give one of John Betjeman's favourite stations a boost it deserves. Talking of celebrations, several stations between Westbury and Weymouth have major birthdays this year and next. The oldest is 175 and the youngest 140. The Wiltshire, Somerset, and Weymouth railway was built between 1850 and 1857, though the company was taken over by the GWR which completed the line. Enough of the past! We have new stations coming soon: Brabazon near Bristol and Charfield (Gloucestershire) next year and Portishead, Pill and Henbury in 2028. GWR is seriously looking to reopen Corsham station too. The government's plan seems to be that all these new stations – plus those opened in the past two years – will be served by a fleet of 35-year-old diesel trains. Considering the fleet is so thinly spread as it is, the plan seems optimistic to say the least. It is also peak season for local plans and local transport plans here in the West Country. Railfuture Severnside has commented on the plans of Somerset, Gloucestershire (two stages) and Bristol City. The results are mixed. Somerset's new LTP is very disappointing. Our latest contribution is to the Cotswold District Council plan, for which we wrote an endorsement of Cirencester Community Railway's call to safeguard the route from the town to Kemble.



Picture: BRUCE WILLIAMSON

Lawrence Hill station: Work gets under way to make it accessible

Devon and Cornwall

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£10k boost for Bideford ambition

Bideford Town Council's August meeting received a presentation from Railfuture's Tim Steer – and was shown a "cheque". Bideford Town Council was a founding member in 2023 of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance. The then-mayor David Ratcliff welcomed the steam engine nameplate "Bideford" into the town's heritage centre but added: "What we really want is the return of the railway." The alliance now has around 50 members or allies lobbying for the modernisation and extension of the Exeter-Barnstaple line. The Railfuture Fighting Fund "cheque" was presented earlier to Network Rail and Great Western Railway towards the cost of a strategic outline business case.

Alliance advertising

A Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance advertisement was published in *TIDAL* magazine to coincide with the Appledore Book Festival in September. Broadcaster Jeremy Vine is a patron of the festival and is also a member of Bideford Railway Heritage Centre. His visit in October highlighted his support for restoring the Barnstaple-Bideford rail link. The alliance advertisement also appeared in *Modern Railways* for November and December.

Alliance action

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance held its autumn workshop in the splendid surroundings of Barnstaple Guildhall, thanks to the generosity of Barnstaple Town Council, one of the alliance's founder members. Key topics were the near-term plans and longer-term strategy for modern rolling stock, Network Rail's detailed work on options for a new timetable for half-hourly services with shorter journey times on a modernised North Devon line, and progress with the business case.

Alliance building

Two members have been welcomed to the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance – West Devon Borough Council, whose area includes both Okehampton stations, and the Devon Association of Local Councils.



Picture: JANINE GARDNER

Railfuture's cheque was presented by Tim Steer (centre) to Bideford Town Council. Pictured, from left, are: deputy mayor Kenneth Hind, councillors Jude Gubb and James Craigie, mayor Peter Lawrence, county councillor Mark Barry and councillors Doug Bushby and Jamie McKenzie



Picture: ROGER BLAKE

SPLENDID ALLIANCE: Representatives of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance gathered in the impressive Barnstaple Guildhall on 9 November for the alliance's autumn workshop

Railfuture supports local plan

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall highlighted two potential rail reopenings when North Devon and Torridge district councils embarked on their next joint local plan. One is Barnstaple-Bideford and the other, already named in the councils' current plan, is the heritage Lynton & Barnstaple Railway. Railfuture's Tim Steer displayed the Railfuture's Devon Metro 2 map when he attended the September open meeting of the Barnstaple & Yeo Valley Railway Trust, which is working on an expansion plan. Railfuture is also studying Mid Devon District Council's new *Plan Mid Devon* as an opportunity for consultation responses.

Reopening hopes in Plymouth

Tim Steer was invited to a transport round-table hosted by Plymouth Sutton and Devonport MP Luke Pollard, who is minister of state for defence readiness and industry. There are four stations in Mr Pollard's constituency, and he wants Laira station – a halt until 1930 – reopened. A new station would serve the present depot and the adjacent local communities of Efford and Lipson. The Plymouth Metro network, when extended to include restored services to Tavistock via Bere Alston, could be the framework to embrace a new Laira station. Luke also backs a new station at Plympton and extension of platforms at Ivybridge station, in the neighbouring constituency of South West Devon.

Visits to new affiliates

Tim Steer followed up Heathfield Rail Link Association's affiliation with a September visit.Another affiliation has followed, with Ivybridge Rail Users Group joining Railfuture in October. A new Ivybridge station opened in 1994 to serve the 12,500 population. The original station, on a different site, closed in 1959. IRUG's current campaign is to extend the new station's 104-metre platforms to enable older trains without selective door opening to call and provide a more frequent level of service.

Making news for rail

Barely a week goes by without some form of media activity by Railfuture Devon and Cornwall. A recent highlight has been chair Tim Steer featuring in the first of a four-part series of GWR videos, *Beyond the Journey,* which is about Okehampton Interchange station.

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall has issued 10 press releases this year, achieving coverage in around 160 reports in print and online media as well as TV and radio.

Use of social media has also been growing with one X post about better services on CrossCountry being reposted by Alex Hynes, chief executive of DfT Operator Ltd.

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Picture: EMILY LLOYD

TRANSPORTED: Tim Steer (second left) with, from left, Matt Barnes of GWR, Dee Cunningham of GWR, Luke Pollard MP, Bogdan Lupu of Network Rail and John Stephens of Plymouth City Council and Peninsula Transport



Heathfield Rail Link Association members at Newton Abbot, left to right: Alan Forsyth, Neil Bromley and chair Mike Cooke with Tim Steer

North East



Picture: LES PIGG

Celebrating two million passengers using the newly reopened Northumberland Line: Dennis Fancett (left) of SENRUG and other campaigners at Newsham station in October. Dennis said: "This vindicates our 19-year campaign to get the line open and our repeated arguments that the line would be well used"

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Congratulations



Peter Walker

With two million passengers recorded in the first two years of operation, it is time to congratulate all those involved in the campaign to reopen the line to Ashington. Two million is an impressive milestone but we are still counting – in anticipation of an even brighter future. Good luck now to all the people working to extend the passenger service to Woodhorn and Newbiggin-by-the-Sea. Crucially the extension has the support of Northumberland County Council, which has gone out to tender for a strategic outline business case for the Newbiggin extension. The council also says it supports SENRUG's aspirations for extending services to Morpeth.

Teesside electrification at last?

Rapid charging equipment and overhead electric wires will be installed at Saltburn (as well as at Hull and Scarborough), which will allow new battery-electric trains to run emission-free on non-electrified parts of the coastal route. TransPennine Express and Rock Rail have signed a £1 billion agreement with Alstom to build 29 five-car Derby-built Adessia Stream trains.

A similar installation at Les Sables d'Olonne in France led to completing electrification in 2008 of the line from Paris and Nantes to the Atlantic coast resort.

It would be nice to think that a similar sequel lies in wait for the Northallerton-Middlesbrough-Redcar branch of the East Coast main line, although no one has promised it yet, despite the large freight haulage potential offered by Teesport, en route. Hopes are high though that TransPennine Express services to Saltburn could be restored once the upgrade is complete.

More Happy New Years for 2027

Once again, in our unusually rail-starved New Year area, we are to see passenger service, running between Newcastle and Carlisle, as well as from Darlington and Middlesbrough to Grosmont and Whitby. There will be two-hourly trains on the Tyne Valley route, and just two return trips to and from Whitby. However, it seems every line in the North East will be open for freight services that day, including the Ferryhill-Stockton route, the shortest and potentially the quickest way to link Teesside with Tyneside. Northern can only run the trains for which it can guarantee staff, but top of Railfuture North East's wish list is the revival of regular, faster Newcastle-Teesside passenger services, via the Ferryhill-Stockton line – not just for New Year's Day. New Year's Day trains started on the Esk Valley to Whitby line in 2023, the first ever in the North East and became possible after years of lobbying the Department for Transport and operator Northern by Esk Valley Community Rail Partnership. A job well done.

Talking up success

Members of Railfuture North East enjoyed an excellent talk from Allison Cosgrove, chair of the Friends of the Settle and Carlisle line, about the S&C's 150th anniversary. The line was saved after an epic campaign in the 1980s. The improvement in service provision – eight trains per day in each direction today compared to two before the planned closure – was also impressed on the audience, as was the success of the Saturday only DalesRail service from the Manchester area through to Ribblehead for those wishing to visit the area without a car.

The S&C Trust has generated income from train catering, cafes at stations on the route and holiday lets using previously disused and derelict station buildings.

Esk Valley good news

Railfuture North East has had potentially good news from the Esk Valley Community Rail Partnership, whose volunteers do so much to help with the Whitby line's upkeep, in a similar way to other volunteers on the Tyne Valley and Settle and Carlisle lines. Thanks to infrastructure work on the 35-mile line from Middlesbrough, to be completed by Network Rail during the coming winter, Whitby trains could, from December 2027, increase to eight daily on weekdays and six on Sundays.

These could include more through services each way between Newcastle, Middlesbrough, Nunthorpe and Whitby. Lobbying by the Esk Valley Community Rail Partnership has secured the funds for the work necessary to make these extras possible, if not necessarily probable.

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Thanks Maurizio



Andrew McCallum

The 12 years of campaigning with Witney Oxford Transport Group by Maurizio Fantato was recognised by Railfuture in September in a ceremony at Oxford Town Hall. Maurizio, who set up the group with the support of Railfuture Thames Valley, was successful in raising the profile of public transport in this busy corridor. At the branch committee meeting, chairman Richard Stow thanked Maurizio for all he had done and presented him with a copy of *Bradley's Railway Guide*. The group is being wound up but the WOT website lives on under Railfuture's banner:
https://witneyoxfordtransport.org.uk/



Picture: ROGER BLAKE

Railfuture Thames Valley chairman Richard Stow presents* Bradley's Railway Guide *at Oxford Town Hall to Maurizio Fantato for his campaigning efforts with the Witney Oxford Transport group

OxRail goes local

The consultation merry-go-round continues with South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils holding a scoping consultation on their joint local plan 2045. Railfuture Thames Valley committee member Gareth Smith submitted a response on our behalf. The main point was to ensure that Oxfordshire County Council's *OxRail 2040: Plan for Rail* is fully incorporated into the plan.

Cowley plans explained

Railfuture Thames Valley is grateful to Oxfordshire County Council's Pete Brunskill for hosting our September members' meeting, at which the council presented detailed plans for the reopening to passenger services of the Cowley branch. See page 21 for a full report. We were delighted to learn from Pete that on 20 October the council's cabinet unanimously adopted *OxRAIL 2040: Plan for Rail*'s update and delivery plan. Branch chairman Richard Stow expressed our appreciation to all involved.

Railfuture at Oxford Green Fair

Railfuture Thames Valley attended the Oxford Green Fair in October. In addition to the usual interest in progress with East West Rail, it was satisfying to have positive news about the Cowley line and direct services to Bristol. Students approached our stand and said: "Can I sign your petition?" They assumed we would have a QR code for them to scan but we did not. Railfuture must learn to use more digital campaigning tools.



Picture: RICHARD STOW

Railfuture director Roger Blake, left, with a visitor to the Railfuture stand at Oxford Green Fair

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Maxi magic for Cowley's MINI line

By Andrew McCallum

Oxford's branch line to Cowley is just over three miles long but work under way will transform passenger services for the whole city.

Trains from London Marylebone which currently serve Oxford and Oxford Parkway stations will continue onwards to terminate at Cowley while also stopping at a new intermediate station at Littlemore.

World famous as the home of Morris Motors and BMW's MINI, Cowley is expanding rapidly as a hub for bio-tech, medical science and advanced research technology.

Connecting these centres of excellence with the wider world sustainably by rail is the key driver for modernising the Cowley railway.

Freight trains loaded with MINIs for export (the current traffic on the line) will be joined in three years' time by passenger trains every half hour to/from London Marylebone.

Railfuture members and guests heard about the exciting plans at Oxford Town Hall in September, from Oxfordshire County Council and Network Rail.

The trains will be six or eight cars long, with a Cowley-Oxford journey time of under 10 minutes.

A crucial point for the project came in 2025 with £120 million from the government, said Simon Lymn, Oxfordshire County Council's lead for the Cowley line.

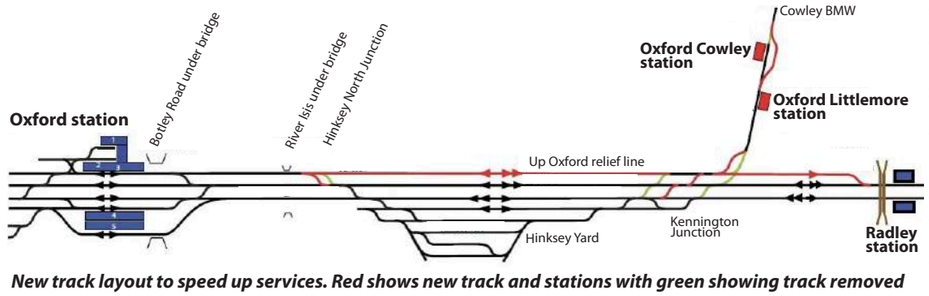
Also critical was a substantial contribution for the construction of Littlemore station from the Ellison Institute of Technology.

Major employment sites such as Oxford Science Park and ARC Oxford (Advanced Research Clusters) will be served by Cowley station.

The project is closely linked to the scheme to add a new platform 5 at Oxford station, where work has begun following the completion of the Botley Road bridge rebuild. That part of the project is scheduled to be complete by summer 2029. The Cowley line should open to passengers at the end of 2029.

One million journeys per year are expected, which should help reduce road congestion and emissions while allowing housing growth of up to 10,000 homes.

Three miles of single-track line will be upgraded with line speed doubling to 50mph, together with provoding three-aspect signalling and improved level crossings, said Network Rail project sponsor, Amjad Ali.



Graphic: Adapted from Network Rail

New track layout to speed up services. Red shows new track and stations with green showing track removed

A turnback at Cowley will support the freight from the BMW MINI plant. The two new stations will be built to accommodate nine-car trains. The up Oxford relief line will be extended southwards from Hinksey North Junction to Kennington Junction (where the Cowley line diverges) and will continue almost to Radley station.

This extension will help provide extra capacity on the very busy Oxford-Didcot line and be especially beneficial for freight services, including intermodal traffic serving Southampton port.

At present trains from Marylebone terminate in Oxford's north-facing bay platforms. Running these trains through to the Cowley line frees up platforms at Oxford station for East West Rail services.

The three through platforms at Oxford, including the new platform 5, will be bidirectional, providing enhanced flexibility of operation at an increasingly busy station.

The rail development lead for Oxfordshire, Rob Freshwater, explained plans to improve accessibility. Just like the new Cambridge South station, Cowley and Littlemore stations will not have car parks except for a few blue badge and drop-off/pick-up spaces. There will be cycle parking and easy pedestrian/cycling/wheeling access. Minor adjustments to bus routes and stops will bring buses close to the stations. Some bus routes serve villages while others serve large housing estates such as Rose Hill and Blackbird Leys. Residents will have greater choice and faster connections to employment, education and leisure facilities.

The Cowley line is an important part of the *OxRAIL 2040: Plan for Rail,* said Pete Brunskill, the rail development lead for Oxfordshire, in his keynote address.

Planning is under way for new stations at Begbroke (north of Oxford) and Ardley (between Bicester and Banbury), while studies continue on double-tracking Wolvercote Junction (north of Oxford) to Hanborough on the Cotswold line and wiring Didcot-Banbury. Funding is being prioritised to develop the Oxfordshire Metro concept.

For more on OxRail 2040 see *Railwatch* 187.

Opening the meeting, Railfuture Thames Valley chairman Richard Stow recalled how campaigning for reopening the Cowley line began years ago.

In 2018, Richard met MP Anneliese Dodds, who was very supportive, her Oxford East constituency being one of the few in England not to have a railway station.

Betjeman award for Andrew

Railfuture's Andrew McCallum has been recognised for his "outstanding" work to promote knowledge and appreciation of Sir John Betjeman. The Betjeman Society presented its vice-chairman Andrew with the annual Betjeman Society Award. The society exists to celebrate the life and achievements of the poet, writer, broadcaster and conservationist, Sir John Betjeman, who was also vice-president of the Railway Development Society, a forerunner of Railfuture. The trophy is a limited-edition cast bronze maquette of the John Betjeman statue at London's St Pancras International station.

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Rail evidence



Jane Ann Liston

Railfuture Scotland has been invited to give evidence to the Scottish Parliament's transport committee, along with the Campaign for North East Rail, Newburgh Train Campaign, Winchburgh Rail Campaign and Rail Action Group East of Scotland. We welcome this recognition of the important position of Railfuture Scotland as the only organisation which represents Scotland's rail users.

Threat to Stranraer line

It is proposed by the powers-that-be that passing loops should be removed from the Stranraer line. This is concerning because their removal would surely make improved frequency and reliability more difficult, as well as for potential freight services or usage by excursion trains. This is a far cry from the claim that the move of the Larne ferry to Cairnryan was an opportunity for a much better rail service to Stranraer once it was free from the constraints of connecting with the ferry. There has been little sign of any improvement in the service in recent years.

Counting the cost

A recent report by *World of Railways* entitled *Britain's Lost Railways – what did decades without passenger trains cost local communities?* examined eight communities disconnected as a result of the Beeching report. One of these was Hawick, and it was calculated that as a result the Borders town had lost economic activity to the tune of £4.68 million since its station was closed. This must strengthen the case for extending the reopened Borders line from Tweedbank at least as far as Hawick, if not all the way to Carlisle.



Picture: NETWORK RAIL

Work on upgrading the West Highland line, including the Gleann Mama viaduct, took place in November. Network Rail renewed track and carried out maintenance work on sections of the line between Helensburgh, Fort William and Mallaig. Replacement buses were laid on for a week during engineering closures near Arisaig, Corrour, in the Loch nan Uamh and Beasdale tunnels, at Arrochar and Tarbet stations and on the Gleann Mama viaduct which was built by "Concrete Bob" McAlpine around 1900. The viaduct is 13 miles west of the more famous Glenfinnan viaduct on the Fort William-Mallaig stretch of the line

Negative attitudes

A year after Transport Scotland rejected Stantec's findings that the transport problems of St Andrews could best be addressed by either a conventional through-running train or a dedicated light rail service to Leuchars, Transport Scotland has dismissed the findings of a similar study into a new railway to Haddington. In both cases Transport Scotland claims that the case was weak, the rail options did not provide value for money and that bus options were not properly investigated before being eliminated, so should be revisited. Some might think it strange that the same arguments were mustered against two very different cases, with one being a busy market town with too much traffic and the other being how to manage the huge number of visitors to an international destination and university town.

With the Newburgh campaign also in limbo due to Transport Scotland's glacial pace, the suspicion is growing that it has already been decided that none of the successful applicants for public money from the local rail development fund will result in a rail solution no matter how strong the case, with all the campaigners urged to investigate improved buses instead. We hope this is not the case.

Tram trains for Edinburgh

Rob Falcon, chair of Tram Trains for Edinburgh, is giving a talk to the Capital Rail Action Group on Thursday 17 December in the Quaker Meeting House, 7 Victoria Terrace, Edinburgh EH1 2JL at 1900. The time of the meeting has been brought forward to allow people from East Lothian and beyond to attend. The meeting fits in nicely with train times to Dunbar.

Contact Lawrence Marshall for more info:
lawrence336@btinternet.com

Praise for volunteers

Volunteers contributed almost 48,000 hours helping transform ScotRail stations during the past year, through ScotRail's Adopt a Station programme. With 214 stations supported by local groups, volunteers have made stations more welcoming places. From restoring overgrown gardens and creating new wildlife habitats to installing colourful planters and celebrating local heritage, 1,054 volunteers have contributed 47,916 hours in the past 12 months to bring new life to station spaces across the ScotRail network. Adopt a Station brings together community groups, schools, charities and local organisations to collaborate with ScotRail.

London & South East

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Yes to better rail



Richard Bowry

Railfuture has been busy in the campaign for better rail services within our region. We recently attended a meeting with Transport for London to explore ways in which the Oyster card and the bank card "tap and go" systems could be improved.

We have had a number of meetings with former train operating companies to call for service improvements. There have been meetings with Greater Thameslink Railway and South Western Railway, while another is planned with Southeastern. We have expressed concern to Southern about the part of the East Coastway line that runs from Wivelsfield to Lewes. The service along the line to Eastbourne was reduced following the August derailment near Lewes. At the time of writing, the full service has not been reinstated. Railfuture committee members also attended an All Party Parliamentary Group hearing on rail issues. We have responded to a consultation process concerning the West London Orbital railway, proposed to run from Hendon on the Midland main line to Hounslow in south west London. We suggested a different termination point at its southern end and commented on the intention to close three level crossings to road vehicles, a sensitive issue in the affected borough which may yet thwart the opening of the proposed line.

One of our key campaign aims is to see at least four trains per hour on all London suburban services. We are pleased that Greater Thameslink Railway will, from its December timetable change, increase services on the Hertford loop from two to four trains per hour. Despite our misgivings, from December GTR intends to increase the number of Gatwick Express trains serving the Victoria-Gatwick route from two to four trains per hour. We continue our Brighton main line/Gatwick campaign which would see more paths dedicated to the busiest trains, as well as a simplification of fares on the route. We have also been pursuing issues on the London Underground. On the District line, we have lent our support to the *Fix the District* campaign. The service beyond East Putney to Wimbledon has deteriorated, and will not be improved by the Four Lines Modernisation programme following an announcement that it will not proceed beyond East Putney. Similar issues of unreliability exist on the Metropolitan line, particularly north of Harrow, and we have liaised with a Railfuture-affiliated rail user group to respond to media interest in these issues.

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Our aims by vice-chair Neil

I have been vice-chair (with Chris Page as chair) for the past few years. Now Mike Southgate is Railfuture's new chair, since the AGM in July, and we are aiming to be a double act with Mike concentrating on governance while campaigning will be my main concern. So, as we draw to the end of 2026, it is a good time to think about what Railfuture should focus on for 2027. From the campaigning perspective, I think there will be two themes:



Neil Middleton

1 The message from government is that there is very little money available for anything other than essentials.

2 Is there any hope that the emergence of Great British Railways will solve any or all of the problems facing the railway?

On the first of these, I think that, at least for day-to-day operations, it is going to prove extremely difficult to shift the dial with campaigning that focuses on matters like "cheaper fares" or "better services".

Probably the only meaningful way Railfuture will be able to achieve a better day-to-day rail service is to focus on the reasons government might support a better railway – by helping it to achieve its wider policy objectives.

For instance, the government talks about "growth in more places". Railfuture needs to tailor our ambitions for a bigger and better railway to this and other government objectives.

It reminds me that we should all be regularly reading our local train operator's social value reports for nuggets of information we could and should deploy.

Of course, we also need to target the right decision makers and supporters, especially as local government has been undergoing widespread changes over the past few years.

If we are seeking a decision on rail matters for Birmingham, the West Midlands Combined Authority is now the most powerful organisation.

Locally to me (Hertfordshire), it is still Westminster, as we do not yet have a combined authority or a regional mayor.

Local politicians are potentially the key supporters for rail improvements.

If we cannot get the support of local politicians, it will be an uphill task to achieve improvements. Of course, we have to continue pursuing the improvement. We have to win over the local politicians and show them how to link railway improvement to wider local priorities.

Parliamentary reception

By the time you read this, Railfuture will have taken positive steps to make Great British Railways more effective in creating a bigger, better railway.

That was one of the aims of the Railfuture parliamentary reception which was held on 25 November.

Before the reception, policy director Ian Brown was involved in preparing a discussion paper to circulate to MPs and their advisers, highlighting the improvements Railfuture wants to see. We need to focus on the basics, campaigning for a boring railway – one that is reliable and can be trusted. New chair Mike Southgate often tells me he applies the "Mrs S test" to suggestions. Can they be relied upon to deliver a reasonable journey – is the train clean, do the toilets work, is it on time, does the air conditioning work? Accountability will be key for Great British Railways, ensuring that someone has both the responsibility and the resources to deliver. At the moment, it is too often person A (who is in the industry) with the responsibility and person B (someone we do not know in a government department) who has the resources. Often it is person B who also holds the key – the power to give approval. One of the key hopes for GBR is getting us to the point that it is the same person with the responsibility and the resources. There are some signs of that, with integrated route managing directors such as Steve White at Southeastern a good example. Their role and authority needs to be expanded to include more rights to change the revenue stream and more control of discretionary spend.

How should Railfuture react? It seems to me that as more funding decisions may be made by devolved authorities, Railfuture regional branches will really be the key players – either alone, or working together with neighbouring branches.

However, some topics need either a whole of England solution or a tri-nation solution. GBR's structure, how fares work (but not their pricing) are all areas where a consistency of approach is needed and Railfuture may need to focus on presenting a single message to Westminster and to central GBR management. That is where Railfuture national directors and groups can be of assistance.

Election of directors

Railfuture is run by a board of directors who receive no pay and are elected (or re-elected) for three-year terms – three each year.

The directors have two key responsibilities – to lead our national campaigning, working with branches and national groups – and focusing on decisions we want the UK government, GBR and other UK-wide organisations to take.

The directors must also manage "the business" – deciding where money is to be spent, ensuring our finances are not exposed to unnecessary risk and managing our IT and membership systems. In doing this, they are supported by a small finance and administration team.

The annual cycle starts in January, with nominations needing to be in by 31 January 2027. Elections (if needed) occur in the spring and appointments take effect at the national AGM in early summer.

If you are interested in becoming a board member, there is more information at:
www.railfuture.org.uk/Railfuture-organisation

Or you can contact one of the current board members. If you are not sure whom to speak to, then contact:
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railwatch

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railfuture
campaigning for a bigger, better railway

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‘Guiding mind’ law catches up with railway

The law to create Great British Railways may be passed by the end of the year when it passes its final stages in the House of Lords.

Great Western Railway becomes part of the national railway on 13 December, and the few remaining privatised train operators – East Midlands Railway, Avanti and CrossCountry – will be nationalised during 2027.

Rail minister Lord Hendy said the emergence of GBR will bring track and train back together, making it easier to move resources around (avoiding the need to store trains in fields) and to deal with the shortage of drivers in some areas. Railway finance is complicated, but the government’s new approach has already identified estimated savings of around £1 billion by 2030 in the cost of running the railway.

The headquarters of GBR will be in Derby, its chairman is Sir John Kingman but many issues remain unresolved. GBR will be a public company combining Network Rail and the train operators along with 17 different organisations.

The government is developing a long-term rail strategy, as well as a plan for improving accessibility, rolling stock and infrastructure.

It is uncertain how the relationship of GBR with devolved governments and authorities, the community rail network, Railfuture and rail user groups will evolve. Creating a bigger, better railway, confronting an unfair fares system, transferring freight from road to rail and electrifying the network are just a few of its challenges.

Transport secretary Heidi Alexander blamed privatisation for many of rail’s problems and told the Labour Party conference in September: “Thirty years of fragmentation created a system where no one took responsibility.”

She added: “Cleaner toilets and more comfortable seats are already being introduced on publicly owned GTR. Let us together give our country the transport system it deserves.” Penalties and compensation will no longer be paid with an end to the “culture of blame” but there may be inconsistency in how GBR allocates capacity. The network is already full at many times and in many places.

Finding enough power in the overhead lines is also a problem. Oil-insulated K11 switchgear dating from 1959 to 1965 is overdue for replacement. It was K11 switchgear which caught fire and put Heathrow Airport out of action last year.

Will the new law end the confusion over whether GBR or the Department for Transport will be the guiding mind? The law gives sweeping powers to the DfT to allow it to direct GBR. And will the government come up with the necessary funding?

Wales as you have never seen it before

By Julian Langston

This map of Wales promotes the new long-distance TaithCymru branded buses. But could this new bus also mean new rail?

Campaigners, hoping to restore a rail service between Carmarthen and Bangor, are looking closely at the TaithCymru initiative.

If the TaithCymru buses prove a success, it will provide impetus to reopen closed stretches of railway between Carmarthen and Aberystwyth, and between Afon Wen (nine miles west of Portmadog) and Bangor.

Launched on 25 October the bus service, operated by TaithCymru (part of Transport for Wales), runs roughly every two hours. It takes about five hours to link Bangor with Carmarthen, up to an hour faster than existing bus services. The new service stops at a number of stations on the route, such as Bangor and Carmarthen.

Railfuture would like to see the service better operated as a “virtual train” so that the bus service is integrated with the rail timetable and booking system. Booking tickets through the Transport for Wales app and website from bus stops and on to the rail network is erratic. Through ticketing works from Aberaeron but not from Dolgellau, for instance, although some bus-rail connections are good.

The major step forward is that five bicycles can be booked on each TaithCymru service. The new service will be very useful for cyclists because, in addition to the rail network, TaithCymru will call at towns not currently served by rail, including Caernarfon, Dolgellau and Aberaeron.

Flaws in the booking system, however, have already appeared. From Aberystwyth you cannot book to Aberaeron and from Bangor you cannot book to Caernarfon. Ironically you can book from Machynlleth to Aberystwyth, a stretch already served by train and a good bus service.

Railfuture Wales is monitoring the campaign to reopen the entire rail route, although currently the limited money available may be better spent on other schemes. The Bangor-Caernarfon section of the route is, however, a priority for reopening.



Graphic: TRANSPORT for WALES

This quirky map of Wales from Transport for Wales is to publicise improved bus links in West Wales from Carmarthen in the south to Holyhead in the north. Trains already serve the Aberystwyth to Porthmadog section, as well as Bangor-Holyhead, but other parts of the former rail network would need to be rebuilt, including Carmarthen-Aberystwyth, if Wales is to have a public transport network that can really unite the country. The TaithCymru branded buses have been speeded up and bikes can be taken on board. All tickets, incuding bikes, must be booked in advance and concessionary passes are not accepted. TfW has also failed to integrate bus and rail ticketing which, together with poor upkeep of bus shelters and lack of bus shelter seating, lets the bright new bus image down. Buses are also often delayed by slow lorries and general traffic. The buses travel roads few cyclists dare venture on.

Railfuture in the News – with railcards

Railfuture is currently getting in the news more often than once every other day. In the rail press, *RAIL* magazine highlighted a Railfuture report on railcards, while *Modern Railways* talked about an “excellent report” Railfuture wrote about trains through Manchester. Seven different stories appeared on various *BBC* regional outlets, while nationally LBC sought our opinion on renationalisation. Our new national chair Mike Southgate and Wessex branch vice-chair Stuart George gave a long interview on *Vectis Radio* discussing a wide variety of railway issues. All this and more at Railfuture In The News:

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

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