

Your letters



Acela reality

The story in *Railwatch 89* about Amtrak's ACELA program unfortunately left a misleading impression of the commercial results of the inauguration of Amtrak's much touted moderately high speed passenger service.

With about half the 20 trainsets in service, as a largely incremental capacity over the 457 mile Boston-New York-Washington, DC corridor, these trains have managed to garner no better than 20+% load factors with little if any incrementality of ridership.

Most riders are instead cannibalized from other trains.

Many ACELA trains have run with as few as a dozen revenue passengers on board, and Amtrak was forced to withdraw its latest attempt at a Washington, DC to New York (221 mile) non-stop, scheduled at the prime morning rush hour time, because only 50 to 60 passengers were riding.

The sets seat 304.

This was the fifth consecutive failure of a non-stop service in that market since 1969.

It is now widely understood that these trains reach their advertised 150 mph speed only for a few miles in rural Rhode Island, and elsewhere are held to speed limits as low as 70 mph. (New Haven-New York) to 135 mph. (in some places south of New York).

This embarrassing commercial failure appears to flow from Amtrak's failure to grasp that high speed rail makes sense only as a response to higher densities of passenger traffic flow in an integrated network of local, regional, and intercity rail services, such as existed in France before introduction of TGV service in 1981.

Nowhere in North America do such conditions exist today.

Our need is to build up a con-

ventional network first—that is unglamorous and time-consuming work.

Some of our states have embarked on that task, but our national passenger carrier is still lost in a fantasy of high speed service in the Northeast's point-to-point linear market.

The 40% load factors there tell how successful they have been.

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Editor's note: This letter was written before the 11 September attacks on New York and Washington.

Rail for the future

It was encouraging to read in *Railwatch 89* about the Acela high-speed rail service in America.

I hope an expansion of high-speed rail projects in America and elsewhere might be one positive result from the tragic events in New York and Washington on 11 September.

However many will switch to road and, as in the UK, there will be a battle to persuade them to leave their cars at home and use a safer means of transport.

British planners need to look for solutions to existing problems to the European mainland where, especially on the safety front, TGV technology and construction has indicated that tinkering around with 19th century infrastructure and signalling on major main lines is a futile economic, financial and commercial exercise.

It offers only a short-term solution to capacity constraints and, I fear, will end in tears.

Britain should be building a high-speed rail network for 140-200plus mph trains which could replace inter-city trains on the West Coast, Midland and East Coast main lines, providing easy transfer to regional, local and urban lines, as well as bus

and tram systems. Classic main lines could be adapted for regional and local passenger connections and for national and international freight.

Influential people from Britain should be encouraged to ride double-decker high-speed trains from Paris to Lyon and Marseille to experience what could be a reality in a north-south link in the UK.

With a far greater population than the French line for its catchment area, the case for a British TGV-style line must surely be overwhelming.

Simon Hope, 144a Webb's Yard, Magdalen Street, Norwich, Norfolk, NR3 1JD

Railway Land

In *Railwatch 89* you featured the Rail Regulator's review of land which Railtrack wanted to dispose of.

There is also an exercise being undertaken by the Strategic Rail Authority to review the land held by the remnants of the BR Board (Rail Property Ltd).

Both these exercises will help prevent the existing rail network shrinking or being strangled, but they do not tackle the much bigger issue of land forming the trackbeds of closed lines which may warrant reopening in the future.

Most of this land has been sold to private owners, farmers, businesses or local authorities, often in very short lengths.

To re-open a closed line, all of these pieces have to be traced and re-assembled, in the same way as the original line builders had to.

Unfortunately there is no proper protection for these land parcels – everything rests on the attitudes of District Councils or similar local authorities which may not even recognise the land as former railways, and may not appreciate whether there is any case for future reopenings.

The Government has issued Planning Policy Guidance 13 to guide local authorities but this relies on local authority members making their own judgements. Many councillors and even planning or development control officers have no railway technical appreciation, others have no interest in public transport and overall the judgement is likely to be made on narrow local issues while there may be a strategic justification in a wider area for a line which just "passes through" the district.

Districts are not obliged to con-

sult county, regional or national bodies when planning applications on former railway land arise. The consequence being that these other bodies do not realise what damage is being proposed!

I have produced a leaflet on behalf of Railfuture entitled *For Want of a Rail* which outlines some of the planning factors which must be taken into account to allow railways to grow, but this can only ever be guidance for authorities which want to take notice!

There is a desperate need for some responsible organisation to take a proper strategic view of all former and proposed routes.

This is a major task, but the longer it is avoided, the worse the prospect for any reopening or new line construction becomes.

Cedric Martindale, Carlisle Cumbria.

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Dunstable trains

I am keen to hear of any progress made on the Luton-Dunstable rail link.

There should be a rail link at both Dunstable and even Houghton Regis.

I for one have no car and can't drive. I travel from London to Leagrave and my girlfriend has to pick me up.

Failing a rail link, there should be an express bus to meet trains at Leagrave for Dunstable.

Andrew Guest

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Selling point

Can I make a plea to all members who write to me, to please write their name and address so that it can be easily read, and preferably not on small scraps of paper.

Today, 18 Aug, I have just received an order for a pad of reusable labels, written on the back of a till receipt for petrol, the only part of the address that is legible is Wales and the postcode.

May I also point out that we can no longer accept Visa or Mastercard – due to the crippling increase in charges made by the banks.

Phil Morris, Railfuture Sales, 113b Pembroke Road, Clifton, Bristol BS8 3EU railfuturesales@lineone.net

Luton interchange

I note it is suggested in *Railwatch 89* that the Luton-Dunstable railway should



extend to meet the WCML "near Cheddington". So why not reopen the former route between Cheddington and Aylesbury, with the potential of providing a second east-west link to Oxford via Princes Risborough?

East of Luton this would have to follow a greenfield route to the Stevenage/Hitchin area, but otherwise there are only a couple of short gaps en route to Harlow and Stansted Airport. Trains could also run through from Hitchin to Cambridge and beyond.

*Simon Norton, 6 Hertford St,
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Beeching in reverse

There has been remarkable feedback to the article and map of Herefordshire published in *Railwatch 89*. Perhaps we should set up a new organisation – allied to Railfuture – called the Beeching Society which could be dedicated to reopening every line he closed. It would provide an ideal opportunity to use steam traction as a way of returning to a slower way of life which we all yearn for. A return to the LMS, LNER, GW, Southern and Scottish would also be welcomed.

*Dr Stephen Sheppard,
45 Hewitt Avenue, Kings Acre,
Hereford HR4 0QR*

Train franchises

Although I have been a rail traveller for many years, I have only recently taken a detailed interest in how the system operates.

I was, therefore, amazed to discover how the franchising system discourages new investment in rail services, at least in this area.

I was recently part of a delegation from the Ormskirk, Preston & Southport Travellers' Association to meet a representative from First North Western, which holds the local train franchise.

He explained that the financial structure set up in awarding the franchise is such that most of the income is effectively fixed (£180million from subsidy, £60million from fares and £20million from other income, such as car parking).

A good deal of the costs are payments to Railtrack. The ratio of cost to fare income is about 4:1.

The result of this is that virtually no new investment is going to pay its way, because the additional income (from fares) is so minimal. There is, therefore,

Ticket to Bristol

Thank you for the rail tickets I won with the Railfuture poster competition. We had a very pleasant day at Bristol Zoo in August. I enclose a picture of a penguin at the zoo.

*L M Griffiths, 12 Rainsborough
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really no financial incentive to attract more passengers (unless they fill up already-running trains).

So improved services, like more frequent, later and earlier trains or better communications about delays, which would undoubtedly get more people on the trains, are effectively ruled out. If it is desirable for more people to use public transport, this method of funding makes no sense at all.

*Martin Wright, Mill House, Mill
Lane, Parbold, Wigan WN8 7NWE
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Road deaths

Godfrey Nall (*Railwatch 89* Letters) says he is avoiding rail travel because of fears about safety. I wonder if he and thousands like him also avoid travelling by road where in Britain 10 people a day die and 1,000 are injured.

The Government's main safety message seems to be "drink-driving kills" with the subliminal subtext: "Sober drivers are safe".

It is obvious that even the sober drivers are far from safe.

*C Oley, 37 New Road, Ormskirk,
Lancs LA0 1SR*

Fare sense

Railfuture's submission on fares (Easy Rail Travel – Fares) is so full of common sense, I fear it will never happen.

Who was the report submitted to?

*Cherry Lavell, 67 Brighton Road,
Cheltenham, GL52 6BA*

Editor's note: The report was sent to a range of "key players" but Railfuture members can play their part by writing to their MPs and mentioning the report.

Litter bins

A shallow tray made of stout cardboard could be an alternative to litter bins on stations. The

litter could be monitored by passers-by and regularly emptied by staff. This safe method of dealing with litter has been used in big stations in France for some time and appears to be successful.

*Eric T Smith, 17 Dalton Avenue,
Leeds LS11 7NN*

Editor's note: The idea was also used on some Connex stations for a while.

Danger drink

I was sacked from my railway job because I had epilepsy. A far greater danger than me was some of my fellow workers who spent time in the pub while waiting for possession of the line to carry out engineering works.

*David Giles, Flat 1, 36 Winn Road,
Southampton, Hants SO17 1EQ*

Welsh needs

I was disappointed when the Government had put on hold the Strategic Rail Authority (based in London) plan for a 20-year franchise and a Wales & Border franchise. This could further delay the reintroduction of passenger trains on the Vale of Glamorgan line. Surely there should be a Welsh division of the SRA accountable to the National Assembly.

There should also be a Transport Authority for Wales, which could develop a coherent rail and road system. The Secretary of State for Wales has the power to set one up if he so wished.

*Mervyn Matthews, Welsh Railways
Action Group, 5a Broadway,
Cowbridge CF71 7ER*

Virgin monopoly

Virgin Atlantic bemoans the fact that if British Airways and American Airlines were allowed to amalgamate there would be a virtual monopoly on Transatlantic air routes and an increase in fares.

Funny how in areas where Virgin Trains have a virtual

monopoly, train fares have increased by up to 70%.

*Roger Smith, 67 The Street,
Little Waltham, Chelmsford,
Essex CM3 3NT*

Bus potential

Your suggestion in *Railwatch 89* that other towns and cities should follow Taunton's example interested me.

By dint of geography, many town bus services in Taunton pass the station. However, the picture is very different if you wish to travel outside the urban area.

The one notable exception is the bus to Minehead which ironically was a "rail replacement" route.

Other country bus services terminate at a bus station, three quarters of a mile from the railway station, leaving passengers to make their own way from one to the other, or more probably, simply to go by car.

This type of situation is, of course, all too common in the UK. Elsewhere in Europe, it is more usual to find the bus station adjacent to the railway station, even where the latter is not in the town centre.

In Belgium, for example, this is the case at Brugge and Charleroi Sud. Why should it not apply at Taunton, Swansea, Swindon and other British towns and cities?

Perhaps town centre bus stations should be sold off and relocated at rail stations.

*Philip Bisatt, 159 Gower Road,
Sketty, Swansea SA2 9JH*

Bankrupt Railtrack

It appears that the Government – and that means taxpayers – may have to compensate both Virgin Trains and Railtrack shareholders for Railtrack's business failures.

This is absolute nonsense – morally, logically and, possibly, legally bankrupt.

While I feel sorry for Railtrack employees who bought shares in their own appallingly-managed business, it is about time the Tory deception – that you cannot lose by buying shares in privatised industries – is finally and irrevocably nailed.

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More letters can be found on the Railwatch website

<http://www.railwatch.org.uk>

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