

The long trek back

When will we realise that the present crisis on the railway has virtually nothing to do with investment?

It is to do with management and to even think that the shambles that stands revealed is caused by Mr Byers taking Railtrack into administration is to fail to understand anything about the industry.

The railway has been suffering from under-investment for decades. The difference is that it has been well maintained in a documented and regulated way, which has allowed it to remain workable and safe even though successive governments starved it of cash.

Those governments also demanded infrastructure cut-backs and many of the passing loops so essential for effective use of the track have been progressively withdrawn. Only the boring formal structure of BR based on the military model kept it safe.

All the time the government carefully monitored expenditure and BR was not allowed to mix maintenance with investment.

Once Railtrack became a private company there was no check on what was maintenance and what was investment and the proud and continuous boast was, "We are spending more on investment than ever before". So they were but on the wrong things.

There followed five years of tarted up stations and bigger and more retail outlets on station concourses. (The cynical view might be the longer the delay to the passenger the more they buy!)

This may well have been admirable if running alongside had not been five years of failure to keep up the maintenance standards or keep proper records resulting in the chaos that followed the Hatfield accident with hundreds of unnecessary speed restrictions, born of ignorance.

In my last *Railwatch* review I mentioned the operation and train regulation as being a shambles.

Sadly I return to this key issue because despite protests from informed people the daily operation of the trains continues to be random and uncontrolled.

It is chaotic because no longer is the speed of the train part of the regulation.

The express, the local train, the freight train and the inner subur-

Rayner's review



ban train, all with differing speeds and differing stopping patterns, had hitherto been regulated one with another to benefit the total railway.

The customer was paramount. Now the accountant is paramount.

Railwaymen who ought to have known better subscribed to the new method of train regulation simply because the new owners could not translate sensible overall regulation into an accountants' formula.

So the regulation of trains was changed. Railtrack and the Train Operating Companies contrived an agreement, which was at best incompetent and worse added some danger to the system. For it certainly increased the risks because the more red signals there are to meet the more likely it will be that someone passes one.

The system now used in effect says the train "on time" takes preference.

This means a train at Penzance bound for Edinburgh if delayed say at Exeter for 5 minutes to put on a disabled passenger, then gets delayed by a local service at Bristol which is on time.

The express, possibly now 10 minutes late behind the local, has no chance of recovery in the Birmingham area and so it staggers on to Scotland quite often over an hour late by the time it gets there.

Again it is easier to shunt invoices and money to and from each

other but at the same time much more difficult to shunt trains – playing monopoly with the tax payers' money.

The latest suggestion is that the trains cannot be run effectively as there are too many on the line.

Is it any wonder! One of the reasons they are cluttered up with trains is because the privatisation arrangements penalise the operator for running long trains resulting in many small trains running up and down busy corridors delaying each other.

The reason is the arrangement for Track Access charges, which once again is an accountant's dream and a practical disaster.

All it has achieved has been to launder the taxpayers' money through the operators to Railtrack.

Perhaps a word about the shareholder controversy, although I belong to the school of thought that says if you back a horse and it goes down then you lose your money. I believe the shareholders are firing wrongly at the hapless Stephen Byers when the real cause of failure of Railtrack was the flawed prospectus that floated the company. This was the work of Conservative Ministers under Mr Major.

They were warned that it would make safety more difficult to manage, they were told that Automatic Train Protection (ATP) should be included in the obligations under which train operators should work, and that Railtrack should have an ATP responsibility because in the event of major accidents which

ATP would have prevented Railtrack would have huge costs.

Apart from accusations from the safety of the House of Commons of scare-mongering those warnings were ignored.

If the shareholders want a scapegoat look no further than John Major's last administration. However the present Shadow Secretary of State appears so ill-informed that I wonder where she was during the run-up to privatisation of railways.

She really should read the privatisation debates recorded in Hansard quoting John Mr MacGregor, Dr Mawhinney, Sir George Young, Malcolm Rifkind, Roger Freeman and many of the lesser ministers to see where the damage to our Railways began. There is documented evidence in the public domain arising from the inquiry into the Southall accident to which I was privileged to give expert witness advice under oath which sets out exactly how things were changed in the run up to privatisation.

For 12 years I have kept records and through a number of reports, briefings for court cases and Select Committee attendances have collected enough facts to know that if the Conservative party want to raise railways as an issue they need to be very sure of their facts or it will backfire on them.

For now good luck to Mr Byers in the hope we have started the long trek back to some normality following 6 years of mismanagement. Let's get on with it.

■ Peter Rayner is a former BR operations and safety officer.

Media support

The ridiculous suggestion by one of the Government's multi-modal studies to convert the Cambridge-St Ives line into a busway is stirring up increasing opposition.

Many more questions are at last being asked about the plan, stimulated by the Hunts Post's "Boot Out the Bus".

The local newspaper has had contributions from a busway expert who says it



is not the right solution for Cambridge-St Ives, as well as a well-argued case for rail by Railfuture's Nick Dibben.

A misguided Cambridge local politician has also tried to defend the busway scheme.