

# Your letters



## Pleck triangle

The recently issued West Midlands Multi-Modal Study has revived the Western Orbital Route. The study is proposing a cut-down version of two bypasses on the A449 around Wolverhampton and Stourbridge.

They are opposed by residents and are environmentally unfriendly as they are intended to be built almost entirely in the Green Belt. However the study did not consider the rail alternative to this road building.

There is a disused rail alignment between Stourbridge and Pleck Junction. If a short chord is built at the junction, for which railway land is available, this line can be linked to the existing rail line from Walsall to Wolverhampton.

This will provide a rail link from Worcester via Kidderminster, Stourbridge, Dudley, Willenhall (proposed) and Wolverhampton to Stafford. This rail line parallels the A449.

If there is so much traffic on this road that the bypasses are necessary then with the Government's current policy to encourage travellers to transfer from the motor car to public transport it must make sense to seriously consider this rail alternative to more road building in the Green Belt.

This line is part of the Pleck triangle of lines. If the line from Stourbridge to Pleck Junction is extended on the existing rail alignment to Lichfield it will provide a link from Worcester to Burton on Trent and Derby.

If this line is reopened it will also provide a rail route from Wolverhampton to Lichfield and beyond with both lines avoiding the congested Birmingham New Street station. There is however a problem with Centro intending to use the alignment from Merry Hill to Wednesbury for Metro and rail freight.

This is, of course, to be supported but part of the alignment can

only accommodate three tracks. Centro is proposing to use two for Metro and one for rail freight. This would make it difficult to introduce passenger rail services.

If the Metro were to use one line, as is used successfully on the Croydon Tramlink, two lines will be available for heavy rail use.

This will allow a frequent Metro service to run alongside a heavy rail passenger and freight route.

The Government has recently cast doubts on the ability of the current rail system to carry the increased number of passengers in its plans.

The Pleck triangle lines will provide much-needed new capacity on the national rail network. It must surely make sense to consider this as an alternative to yet more road building.

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## Ipswich busway

Members are urged to visit a busway and draw their own conclusions as to their real purpose. One such is adjacent to a Tesco supermarket at Ipswich, actually in the Suffolk local authority area.

The technology is that of a plate-way. Guide rails are about a foot high; guide wheels, immediately behind the steering road wheels are about nine inches across and all run on a pair of concrete planks between kerbs just wide enough to clear the bus rear wheels; residual space is grassed.

The busway's designers seem not to have had a toy trainset between them as children for if they did classic guided system design defects would not have been recreated as fundamental flaws. No allowance is made for trailing road wheel inswing, con-

sequently the design cannot work on curves as the rear wheels ride up the inside kerb! Thus the steering kerb can only be on the outside of bends. Requiring drivers to steer through bends rather defeats the object! To work ubiquitously the steering mechanism must follow a groove or guide wire located in the road, a fifteenth century technique developed in Silesian coal pits.

Being built dead straight to work at all the section of busway is as much a technological dead end as maglev, Wupertal monorail and Listowel & Ballybunion tri-rail.

The only way the existing design can be made to work is to locate and convert the two steering walls as grooves in the road and were these grooves to be made of steel they become load bearing.

It is "common knowledge" that steel wheel on steel rail tramways cause traffic jams although nobody has explained why Blackpool trams, before Manchester opened, caused traffic jams on the M25!

The whole is about re-inventing the wheel; a busway has nothing to do with improving public transport and everything to do with protecting local authority budget and planners' empires.

When the busway fails the whole will be converted to a link road between two parts of the local road system. This is a busway's real purpose.

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## Late trains

I have never accepted the train operators' idea that a train arriving within five minutes or 10 minutes of its scheduled time is on time.

Trains used to be counted as late if they arrived at the final destination five or more minutes late.

BR changed the definition, presumably with the agreement of the Rail User Consultative Committees, so that long distance trains could be up to 10 minutes late at their final destination before being deemed late and short distance ones five minutes.

The Strategic Rail Authority should insist that punctuality statistics are factual, and not allow this "massaging" to make

things appear better than they are. When I joined BR in 1961 my understanding of train working was that safety and punctuality were paramount, so this idea of a late train being "on time" is completely alien to what I believed in.

Even a minute's delay to a train can affect other services especially at flat junctions, other pinch points, and at major stations, particularly if trains are running with close headways such as two minutes or less.

Up to 10 minutes' delay on one service can seriously delay other trains behind it especially if those sharing the same track are a mixture of stopping and express services.

The late arrival of one train also means a late departure for its next working, where there are quick turnrounds at terminal stations.

The devil is in the detail – even one minute, when it comes to train operating.

If the SRA is happy with the amount of latitude given for "on time" arrivals, why isn't this information published in timetables, so Joe Public knows what to expect?

Mind you, it is worth pointing out that only the railways provide such figures. Their competitors never do.

*Ken Cropley, 37 Parklands,  
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## Electrification

Will Railtack or the Government ever get their fingers out and get on with electrification of Midland main line, East Coast main line to Aberdeen and Great Western line or are these vital projects just pipe dreams? Britain is the only country in Europe where this farcical lack of action is allowed.

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## Trackbed

The possible restoration of many lines is often dismissed because of alien development on the trackbed.

A railway requires little space and closer examination shows that generally only a handful of buildings would be affected if a line were reopened, although it might sometimes be necessary to re-site stations and goods yards. The partial obstruction of a line should certainly not be used as an excuse to deny the

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remainder of the route protection. When property obstructing a line comes up for sale in the normal course of things, it can be acquired and let on a short term basis until such time as the line is rebuilt, minimising disruption to owners.

Jonathan Dalton, 2 Regency Court, Enys Road, Eastbourne BN21 2DF

## Dawlish alternative

Sizeable urban communities in 2002 remain cut-off, lingeringly remote, in their rural backcloths, far enough away from the railway network for the traveller to be seriously inconvenienced.

One such is the bustling market town of Tavistock. Moreover Cornwall's only linkage by train to the rest of modern day England is by way of the tortuously twisty route through Dawlish and its "Warren".

Yet how often is that track closed each year due to storm and sea damage!

Both problems could be solved if the renowned old Southern trackbed is put back to rail, across the western flank of Dartmoor. Mostly, this is in situ across sheep farmland or wilder countryside.

Today's politics seems to dictate, this needs to be undertaken by private initiatives. It is 31 miles, Meldon to the junction outside of Plymouth.

A feasibility study is unnecessary and is financially wasteful. Both the rightness and the practicality are obvious.

Can someone locally (and younger than myself) get things going?

There could be two friendly

rivals: TGN (Tavistock Going North) and TGS (Tavistock Going South) to raise cash, to purchase back the land in strips, to "hurry through" the legal work and to re-create a double-track main line.

Dr Stephen Sheppard (founder of Rail for Herefordshire Group), 45 Hewitt Avenue, Hereford, HR4 0QR.

## Railway closures

I was intrigued by the discussion on Dr Beeching in the December *Railwatch*.

While not a supporter of the good doctor, he should be judged on the job he was asked to do which, to a large extent, he did effectively. As pointed out railway closures had been going on for a hundred years and his remit was partly to look at things from a global viewpoint and design for the future (rather like the Strategic Rail Authority!).

So, rather than continue with piecemeal measures, there would be an acceleration of closures and then a consolidation and no more. This has largely been the case.

An interesting book is *Beeching, Champion of the Railway?* by R H N Hardy which is perhaps rather too favourably disposed towards Beeching.

However whatever one thinks of his overall plan, mistakes were made in closing important lines that are badly needed now. To be fair perhaps he should be judged on the prevailing assumptions that railways in Britain were in irreversible decline.

The blunders include: Great Central line, Woodhead Manchester-Sheffield,

Lincolnshire coast line, Somerset and Dorset, Midland Derby to Manchester line, Waverley route.

Don't forget he also wanted to close all lines north of Inverness and the Settle-Carlisle route.

The Oxford-Cambridge route, however, was not on his list.

In this part of the world (Northants, Bucks, Beds, Hunts) there were hardly any closures pre-1950, a few in the early 1950s and early 1960s. We cannot blame Dr Beeching for these.

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## Ken's vision

Chiltern Trains managing director, Adrian Shooter, is somewhat hard on London Mayor Ken Livingstone, whom he tells to "put his hand in his pocket" (*Railwatch* 90) in order to improve the situation at Sudbury Hill.

The former "Red Ken" has always been an enthusiastic supporter of rail in the Capital, and those of us over a certain age still remember the "Fares Fair" ticketing row that was dubiously outlawed by the late Lord Denning.

Indeed sympathy over how Margaret Thatcher did away with the old Greater London Council, along with the backing that his cheap fares policy had, was probably one reason why he got elected as an independent.

Today Mr Livingstone is doing what he can to help travellers. Elsewhere in the same issue he's reported as joining a steering group to promote Crossrail,

and helping to set up a company that wishes to develop a rail line from Hackney to south west London.

If the Government had some of his vision, the railways wouldn't be in the mess they are today.

Tim Mickleburgh, 33 Littlefield Lane, Grimsby, Lincolnshire, DN31 2AZ

## Train robbers

I read with great interest a travel log by Frank Barrett published some time ago in the *Mail on Sunday*.

I agreed with him that what is has been going on with the rail fare structure since privatisation has been a national disgrace.

But given both the former Conservative Government which created this chaos because it did not want to invest in the rail network and now New Labour which continues to be under the thumb of HM Treasury will only give short-term investment plans means there is no way forward for train operators to meet their financial commitments unless they get involved in demand management and offer stupid fares.

The rail network needs a good sort-out and needs to become a priority.

But when did you read of a Cabinet minister using the train to get to work and endure what the rest of us endure.

When they do, then real political clout will be put into making our network one to be proud of.

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# Friends of the railway

Friends of the Earth are launching a high-profile rail campaign this spring. They have appointed a rail campaigner, Richard Dyer, specifically to work on this new campaign.

Commenting on the upcoming campaign he said: "Organisations such as Railfuture are already doing some excellent work to promote the cause of rail and I hope that our campaigners will work together on issues of common interest. FOE's immediate campaigning priority is getting more public funding for the railways.

"The Treasury must commit more money to rail in this summer's Comprehensive Spending Review if we

are to see the kind of improvements to the network that are needed, especially in areas outside London and the South East.

"Essential schemes such as the improvements proposed through the capacity studies for Manchester and the West Midlands are only scheduled to see minimal development work before 2010 in the SRA Strategic Plan.

"We think this isn't good enough and Gordon Brown must find the extra resources needed to bring these schemes forward.

"The SRA must also have the resources to develop rail schemes that it can enthusiastically champion as

alternatives to road building in the Government's Multi Modal Studies.

"Our campaign will give angry passengers an opportunity to voice their support for more Treasury funding for the railways. We hope that Railfuture campaigners will support it."

Any Railfuture campaigners who want to become involved in the campaign should contact Alex Phillips on 020 7566 1673 alexp@foe.co.uk or Richard Dyer richardd@foe.co.uk or their local Friends of the Earth group for further information.

Friends of the Earth have set the dates for a week of rail action – Saturday 13 April to Sunday 21 April.