

Reopening success story

By Alan Bevan

The 11th Railfuture Reopenings Conference in Derby on 25 May was attended by 75 delegates from throughout Britain who were addressed by journalist Christian Wolmar, Nottinghamshire county council rail officer Jonathan Hall and Railfuture's South Wales member Malcolm Parker.

North Midlands chairman Graham Nalty welcomed everyone and conference chairman Michael Caton referred to a recent meeting with ministers, lobbying against busways, and concerns about extra costs being imposed on reopening schemes.

Mr Wolmar retraced the dysfunctional background politics leading up to the incomprehensible privatisation. Despite a weak SRA and Government apathy he said rail patronage had grown as a result of a buoyant economy and road congestion.

He also drew attention to the undue costs of rail projects arising from the complex interface of too many companies.

He urged Network Rail to take maintenance back in-house and the SRA to assume more direct control. Not least Mr Wolmar advocated a stronger and more professional form of lobbying for our railway.

Mr Hall was able to relate to delegates the progress and success of the Robin Hood line including the 37% modal shift achieved from car travel.

He also outlined the current funding opportunities for rail projects such as Rail Passenger Partnership, the European Union, local transport plans, regeneration bodies and local authorities. A new Ilkeston station was being held up by the need for new track capacity and signalling.

A very progressive and encouraging report was given by Malcolm Parker on South Wales developments including the Vale of Glamorgan reopening due in 2003 and the Ebbw Vale project aimed at 2005.

The Derby Waterfall Centre with its large hall and on-site licensed catering facilities proved most satisfactory for delegates, not least being conveniently opposite Derby rail station.

The conference venture also produced a healthy surplus for Railfuture.

Robin Hood rescue

The story behind one of the most successful rail reopenings in Britain was explained at the conference by Nottinghamshire County Council's Jonathan Hall.

Mr Hall, a senior officer with the rail projects team, described how the council gave the go-ahead to the implementation of the £28million Robin Hood line reopening on a three-stage basis in 1991.

Notts and Derbyshire county councils were responsible for rescuing and rehabilitating the closed route infrastructure while district councils took responsibility for the stations. £13million came from the Government, £6million from the European Union while British Rail and Railtrack contributed only £0.5million.

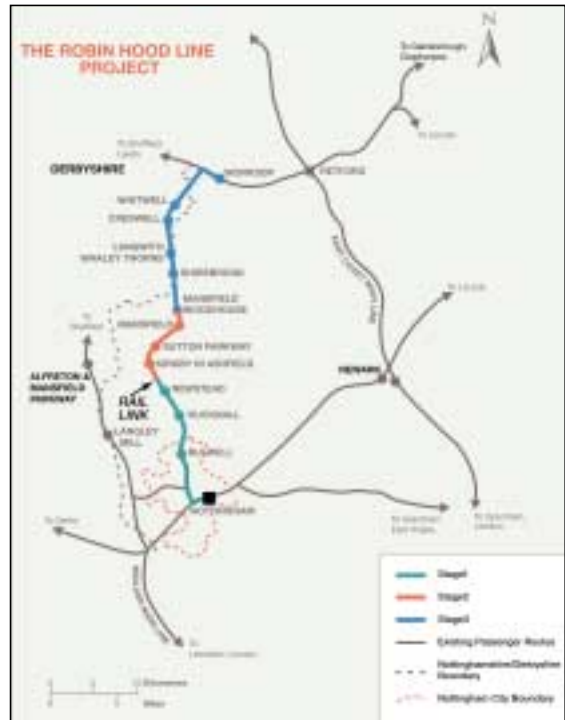
Crowds greeted the trains when they returned to Hucknall, Newstead and Bulwell in 1994. Other stations came back on to the network later. Now over 3,300 trips are made on the line each day with 37% of the passengers having switched from car use. More than 70% of the passengers chose to use the train even though they could have driven their own cars.

Although it still requires public subsidy, the Robin Hood Line has shown that rail can attract passengers as long as there are regular departure times, reliable services, attractive fares, live passenger information and effective marketing.

Mr Hall said the time needed to implement the scheme was very lengthy, there were cost increases because of privatisation, and raising the necessary funds was a tortuous process.

The introduction of the Rail Partnership Fund in 1998 should make other projects easier to implement. It can fund schemes which shift passengers from road to rail and the money can be used for both capital and revenue support. Promoters of other schemes were advised to have a clear vision, recruit political "champions" and ensure there is technical help from rail professionals, and proper cost control.

■ In June the SRA, Nottingham City Council and Nottinghamshire County Council provided £300,000 to fund a half-hourly service between Nottingham and Mansfield Woodhouse.



More battles ahead

Despite the success of rail reopening schemes, many councils are way behind Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.

Cambridgeshire County Council - 10 years ago committed to reopening Cambridge-St Ives - is now pressing ahead with a ridiculous plan to put a busway on the "mothballed" line. And it wants £73million of taxpayers' money to implement the plan.

That sort of money would be much better spent on bringing back the trains. Sadly the busway idea was supported by the Cambridge to Huntingdon Multi-Modal Study without even considering the idea of mixing light and heavy rail. Cambridge should follow the example of Karlsruhe, Germany, where trams penetrate the city streets but also provide a service on heavy rail

routes. The Cambridge-St Ives line should remain part of the rail network and be available for all types of trains and trams, not a concrete monstrosity used only by buses.

Elsewhere there is more sensible thinking. The London to South Midlands Multi-Modal Study has recommended reopening Bedford-Northampton and extending the electrified Thameslink service to Northampton.

This has been a campaign objective for the Bedfordshire Railway and Transport Association (contact: 01234 405268) since it was formed in 1997.

There would be rich rewards for the train operators as the link would unlock a second commuting route to London and the prospect of long-distance ticket sales, for instance from Luton to Birmingham.