

Are managers at fault?

Each time I write in *Railwatch*, and I am beginning to collect my articles together along with other things I have written in other journals over the years, I am starting to get the feeling that I am Nostradamus.

I wish it were true, of course, for no-one can foretell exactly what will happen but the railway as it now is is undeniably worse than I prophesied 10 years ago.

Please do not think it pleases me. It saddens me that seven people have died at Southall, 31 at Paddington, four at Hatfield, seven more at Potters Bar before anybody listened to us. I have no reason to feel pleased, of course, only a sense of failure that no-one listened. Perhaps I didn't shout loud enough!

Even now, I am not happy with the way the railway is being run. We have a Strategic Rail Authority deliberately using price rises to stop growth. The privatised railway, they say, costs more. So we pay more to get less. The privateers have quite a lot to answer for.

Returning to safety, the tragedy of Potters Bar may well have woken the industry up at last. In fact it was already waking up when the Government took back control and placed Railtrack into administration.

Potters Bar was sensibly responded to by professional railwaymen. There was no attempt to cover up in order to protect share prices. There were no accountants talking uninformed nonsense about causes of the crash and there is no doubt that the professionals inside Railtrack dealt with it without causing unnecessary ongoing panic.

No, I am not going to go on about Jarvis and about Mr Norris appearing and talking of sabotage. Let their actions be judged by my readers.

What to me is saddest about Potters Bar is the secrecy surrounding the poorly trained maintenance people who are going to be in the firing line for what to me are management failures.

After the Clapham crash, we learnt some lessons about technical deficiency and pressures on staff on the ground.

With great patience and care, we created a system of competency standards drawn up by experts belonging to the Institution of Railway Signal Engineers (IRSE). We were working towards only employing trained staff with competen-



Rayner's review

cy certification and although I believe many of the people involved in the work of Potters Bar were doing their best, it is my understanding that none of them actually had the appropriate certification.

Whose fault is that? Management again, I fear. Privatisation and the desire to

make profit and to cut corners got rid of some of these extremely important safety strands. I have said it before and I say it again, BR was quite boring but it had safety right through the middle of it like Blackpool through a stick of rock.

It seems absolutely astonishing that after Railtrack Group directors recommended acceptance of the bid for Railtrack PLC by Network Rail, some shareholders still wanted to hold out for £9 a share.

Under the deal, they are expected to receive between £2.45 and £2.55 per share, which were at one time worth only £1.70.

Let's not forget that the company's own mistakes caused the Railtrack collapse.

Recently I have been reading a report published on the Department of Transport website which quotes the views of industry insiders.

It is a pity, of course, that these people couldn't have said it earlier – before the accidents started to happen. But now, at least, managers feel confident enough to say to outsiders what they think. There is a general acceptance that Railtrack failed to focus on its core business. In my view Railtrack concentrated on

retail outlets and did not, for instance, give enough consideration to signalling at Paddington.

The report says that Railtrack was arrogant and would not collaborate. It had a long-term desire, it seemed, to avoid responsibility. That became part of the Railtrack culture.

Railtrack did not keep an asset register. It put out the management of the maintenance work – as well as the work itself – to contractors. That meant that contractors were making decisions on what needed to be done.

They introduced a regulation policy that was based upon contracts and the rights of the train operator whose train was running on time. The traditional method of regulation was sidelined.

I notice that the "Professional Railwayman" in *Railwatch* 92 suggested I was wrong in this respect and that he and that his colleagues are still regulating in the time-honoured way.

I am aware that many good railwaymen are still working in this way. However there are a number of key signal boxes on key routes which are working to the official Railtrack regulation policy. So long as that goes on the railway cannot be operated in a sensible manner.

The correspondent is genuine, I am sure, but his method is not being applied on some of the main lines on which I – and many others who work in the industry – ride quite frequently.

The report on the website highlights the lack of industry leadership, leading to confused and conflicting priorities.

It also points out that the central industry body – which was Railtrack – failed in its duties as infrastructure manager.

It mentions the fragmented nature of the industry, which we have been highlighting for nearly 10 years without anybody in authority listening to us or taking us seriously. It really is an extremely sad picture.

I come back to something else I said: "The only two parts of the industry that seem to have made any money successfully doing what they do are the makers of different styles of uniform and the makers of different colour paints."

That still sums up the railway as it is today.

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

Target £1million

The campaign to rebuild the Wensleydale railway has won support from TV actor Robert Hardy. Mr Hardy who played Siegfried in the James Herriot TV series, has officially launched the railway's Let's Make it a Million campaign.

£1million is needed for the share offer that aims to bring regular passenger train services back to a scenic Yorkshire dale.

People are being encouraged to log on to www.wensleydale-railway.com for a prospectus for the share offer, which is based on ordinary shares of £1 each. It is hoped that the first passenger trains will run on the line later this year.

"Not far to go now!" said Mr Hardy, launching the campaign with a passionate speech about railways in general and the Wensleydale Railway in particular – a "gallant and effective enterprise".

"Robert Hardy's interest in, and familiarity with, our plans for reopening the railway through Wensleydale are a great encouragement to us," said Wensleydale Railway's marketing director Ruth Annison.

£890,000 has already been raised by the offer, which was launched in November 2000. With just over £100,000 to go to reach the million pound milestone, chief executive Scott Handley says that this is an opportunity for people to be a part of an exciting project that will be a model for future regeneration not just of a railway, but of remote rural communities.

Anyone wishing to invest in Wensleydale Railway plc should first obtain a prospectus by logging on to the website, calling Freephone 0500 824166 during office hours or by writing to Wensleydale Railway, 35 High Street, Northallerton DL7 8EE