

1992-2002 The missed chances

What might have been

What might we have expected on the railways in the past 10 years? This is an illustrative list:

A continuing programme of 10 to 15 new stations a year, including stations serving places as diverse as Kenilworth and Peterlee.

Services reinstated to Alloa, Ebbw Vale, Leicester-Burton, the Oxford-Cambridge East-West link and Uckfield-Lewes among many others.

Electrification of various "infill routes" and smaller schemes, such as Manchester-Preston-Blackpool, Ashford-Ore, and Hurst Green-Uckfield, various local network extensions such as on Merseyrail, and a start on at least one major route (either the Midland or Great Western).

Completion of Thameslink 2000, other smaller London projects such as the East London Line extension and Croxley link, and a start on Crossrail.

More rail links to airports, including Heathrow (South and West), Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Faster progress on light rail in Nottingham, Bristol, Leeds and South Hampshire.

Major capacity additions at bottlenecks in Welwyn, Birmingham, Manchester.

Progress on East and (especially) West coast upgrades to 140mph and ATP.

Eurostar services to the Midlands, North and Scotland and possibly the West.

A start on upgrading freight infrastructure, including selective gauge-enhancement.

Serious long-term thinking about new high-speed routes north and west of London, to attract traffic to rail from air and road.

How it all went wrong

1992 May: Conservatives under John Major unexpectedly win election

July: White Paper *New Opportunities for the Railways* proposes BR privatisation

1993 January: Rail Regulator, Franchise Director and Railtrack Chairman appointed

20 January: Transport Select Committee publishes interim report - *The Future of the Railways*

27 April: Transport Select Committee publishes full report - *The Future of the Railways*, scathing of the privatisation process

May: Robert Adley MP, Transport Committee Chairman, defender of BR, dies following a heart attack

November: Railways Bill becomes law, Rolling stock orders cease

1994 April: Railtrack takes over the infrastructure

10 May: Crossrail scheme fails in Parliament

15 October: Cowden train crash, five dead

14 November: Channel Tunnel opened for passenger traffic

1995 31 January: Aisgill derailment, three dead

May: Franchising process begins. Motorail services cease

December: Passenger train building at York ceases

1996 4 February: First privatised trains run

24 February: Freight companies sold to Wisconsin Central

8 March: Stafford (Rickerscote) train crash, one dead

May: Railtrack sold by flotation

24 July: Central Railway scheme fails in Parliament

8 August: Watford train crash, one dead

September: Rolling stock orders resume after 35 months, with order from Chiltern

18 November: Fire closes Channel Tunnel for a month

1997 4 January: Eurostar HST feeder service ended

February: Staff cuts lead to first train cancellations on privatised routes (SWT)

25 February: Last franchises let in haste as election looms

31 March: Last BR passenger train runs

1 May: Labour government comes to power

9 July: Euro-Night-Star service plans abandoned (stock sold in December 2000)

16 July: Thrall freight wagon building starts at York

19 September: Southall train crash, seven dead

22 November: Railfreight Distribution (last part of BR) sold to EWS

1998 25 May: Heathrow Express airport branch opens

3 June: Channel Tunnel rail link rescued by Government financial package

July: White Paper *A New Deal for Transport* published

1999 25 February: John Prescott launches First National Rail Summit

July: Railways Bill published, Shadow Strategic Rail Authority set up under Sir Alastair Morton

5 July: Tom Winsor takes up post as Rail Regulator

22 July: Ed Burkhardt ousted as EWS chairman

August: Motorail services to West Country reintroduced

26 September: Anglia Crossrail and Leeds-Glasgow services commence

5 October: Ladbroke Grove train crash, 31 dead

20 November: Jubilee Line extension opens just in time for Millennium

2000 February: First franchise bail-outs (MTL, followed by Prism in May)

February: Arthur D Little report condemns regional Eurostars

26 February: Uff report on Southall crash published

Spring: Fuel tax escalator

abolished in the Budget

July: *10 Year Plan* for transport published

August: Birmingham's Proof House Junction blockade ends on time and on budget!

September: Fuel tax protests (despite the Budget above!)

25 September: First "open access" operator - Hull Trains - starts up

17 October: Hatfield train crash, 4 dead

17 November: Railtrack chairman Gerald Corbett resigns

November: Flooding causes weeks of havoc

November: Transport Act 2000 (subsuming 1999 Bill) passed

26 November: Customer care reaches all-time low after minor derailment at Mossend

2001 January: Christmas closure at Leeds overruns by two weeks

1 February: SRA becomes official, refranchising process commences

28 February: Great Heck (Selby) accident, 10 dead

18 March: BRB finally abandons plans for regional Eurostars

March Uff-Cullen report on safety systems published

8 June: Stephen Byers replaces John Prescott as Secretary of State for Transport

June/September: Cullen report on Ladbroke Grove crash published (two parts)

7 October: Railtrack taken into administration

1 December: Richard Bowker takes over as SRA Chairman

2002 January: SRA Strategic Plan published

28 February: Nocton (Lincs) accident, one dead

10 May: Potters Bar train crash, seven dead

28 May: Stephen Byers replaced by Alistair Darling as Secretary of State for Transport

27 June: Network Rail agrees to buy Railtrack for £500million

28 June: Thrall announces proposed closure of York wagon works (at end of year)

What we need to do now

AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

1 Railtrack

Railtrack must be taken out of administration as soon as possible, certainly by the end of September 2002. Under no circumstances should it be sold to the banks, foreign or not. The not-for-profit option looks like the best solution and the Government's plans were announced at the end of June to transfer the operating railway to Network Rail. This is of course subject to approval by Railtrack shareholders. Most institutions are expected to back the plan, simply to cut their losses, while small shareholders will probably oppose it.

2 Contractual relationships

An independent, objective commission should examine the relationship between Railtrack/Network Rail and the Strategic Rail Authority on one hand and the contractors on the other. There appears to be a good case for taking infrastructure maintenance back in-house, to replace some of the many contracts by direct managerial control and eliminate the lawyers, accountants and consultants.

Equally the idea of making Railtrack or its successor a wholly-owned subsidiary of the SRA seems to merit serious consideration. These two measures would go a long way towards eliminating the fragmentation and re-establishing a firm grip on infrastructure maintenance.

3 Safety bodies

The proposed Rail Industry Safety Body should be established independently of Railtrack as soon as possible. The Railway Inspectorate should be given back its independence from the Health and Safety Executive. A rail accident investigation branch (modelled on the air and marine equivalents) should be established, ideally within an all-mode Transport Safety Authority.

4 Franchises

A long hard look is needed at franchising. Is it delivering? Is it workable in the long term? As



CATCHING UP: A new Virgin Pendolino tilting train stops on 16 June 2002 to salute Britain's advanced passenger train abandoned in 1987 but now preserved at Crewe. Picture: Milepost 92½

several franchises presently operate on a cost-plus arrangement, it is by no means certain that the answer to these questions is yes. If not, then the whole franchising operation could be wound up in the period 2010-12, with shorter franchises extended or renewed until then. The SRA could then re-establish the former BR sectors as wholly-owned subsidiaries from that date.

Failing this, the number of franchises needs to be reduced, with up to eight regional franchises outside London. London suburban franchises should be combined so as to encourage the development of cross-London routes (eg South Central, Thameslink and Great Northern) and a London Metro network. Merging inter-city and London commuter franchises generally does not seem a good idea.

There has to be an end to short franchises. The refranchising process should aim to ensure that no franchise ever has less than five years to run. Apart from in a few self-contained areas, vertical integration would be problematic in anything but a fully integrated railway, as the interests of minor operators and freight could be threatened.

5 Staff training and industrial relations.

To avoid a repeat of the present wave of strikes, and end poaching of newly trained staff, a

proper industry-wide career structure needs to be restored, and a central training body for all staff set up to ensure proper standards are maintained.

6 A customer friendly system

The level of all walk-on fares needs to be regulated and a simple, uniform set of rules governing validity, times, etc, re-established. Railcards, Network cards, Rangers and Rovers, and multi-modal Travelcard style passes should be available nationwide and promoted seriously, to encourage brand loyalty through prepayment. Fares and ticket purchase needs demystifying to attract the unaccustomed user. Performance monitoring needs to focus on the total passenger journey, not just on train punctuality at its journey's end.

7 Transport policy and administration

Passenger transport executive-style powers should be extended to all parts of the country, ideally at regional or sub-regional level. Elected regional bodies with strategic land-use and transport planning powers should be established throughout the UK. Regional rail strategies, encouraging full integration with other modes should be developed and implemented.

8 Funding and charges

The issue of congestion charging on roads (not just tolls on motor-

ways) must be grasped, and the emphasis of road taxes shifted from fixed fees such as Vehicle Excise Duty on to use-based charges such as fuel tax, and locally collected road charges which should be reinvested in local transport infrastructure.

9 Government leadership and commitment

The Government should direct some serious new money into national infrastructure projects and take responsibility for funding major rail projects as it does for highways, matching the private investment that is now beginning to flow into rolling stock building. In return the industry must get a grip on cost-escalation in infrastructure projects.

"Predict and provide" road building must stop, and traffic growth must be restrained by pricing. If the Government caves in to the road lobby every time, the transport crisis will never be solved.

■ This article draws on material in the book *Broken Rails* by transport commentator Christian Wolmar, whose assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

Anyone wishing to learn more about the politics and railways of the past 10 years should read this book (Aurum Press £9.99)

Additional research by Richard Pout.