

Your letters



Joint service

The Silverlink Euston-Birmingham service via Northampton is to be cut back, I thought to Rugby, but now I learn to Northampton. As a sort of compensation the Central Trains' Wolverhampton to Coventry service is to be extended to Northampton.

Surely, pending the vital quadrupling between Stechford and Berkswell, it would be better to maintain the economical through service between New Street by curtailing Central Trains at New Street.

Better yet, how about a joint Wolverhampton-Euston service, run by Silverlink and Central Trains. They are both National Express franchises after all.

A final thought. Supposing a few trains were diverted from the Stour Valley line to serve Walsall?

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Piggyback poser

It is too simplistic to think that it is only the restricted UK loading gauge that is stopping the growth of piggyback traffic.

Piggyback rail wagons are available but they remain rusting in sidings for the want of customers.

Similarly, variable height road trailers were designed and a few built, but a lack of customers meant no more were made.

The end user is far too sophisticated to be fooled into thinking that because it arrives at his warehouse on rubber tyres it must be OK.

Piggyback suffers the same rail problems as swap body, container or conventional wagon – a perception and sometimes a reality of poor service, time-keeping, etc. When the railway gets its act together and solves these problems, the customer will use rail. At that stage the

end user won't care whether it is a piggyback trailer or swap body, they both look the same from the loading dock.

Within any given loading gauge, a swap body will deliver a better cubic capacity, a similar tare/payload ratio in road mode and a vastly superior one on rail. Piggyback trailers have to be lifted on to rail. You may as well lift the body only and leave those heavy and costly road wheels behind to be used carrying another body rather than occupying valuable loading gauge space. Indeed, it is a fact that in many circumstances it is cheaper to fork lift palletted goods from conventional wagons rather than use a large transshipment crane.

George Boyle, Railfuture Freight Committee, Furness Vale, Stockport SK12 7PX

Negative vibes

There are now so many excellent rail schemes being shelved by the Strategic Rail Authority that many good ideas are not even being suggested.

Even simple schemes could produce more rail traffic. While in Cardiff for the Railfuture AGM, I used the Coryton line to get back to my hotel at Whitchurch – an excellent 30-minute interval service.

But Whitchurch Station, on the main A470 road, has only a station sign at road level. There is no layby to accept "kiss and ride" passengers who could then commute into town. Stopping is not allowed on the road near the station.

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Fares policy

We are all very frustrated by the complexity of fares structures. It often seems necessary to do research before buying a ticket, but this is not really practical at the booking office. You would

probably get lynched by the growing queue if you asked things like "but what if I got a day return to B, and then got a day return at B to C". Followed by "But what if I travelled via D instead".

This sort of research can be carried out by those with time and access to the internet by using sites like the www.trainline.com and now www.qjump.com (similar but doesn't seem so good for specifying unusual routes).

It can reveal all sorts of anomalies. In my opinion it shows that some operators are rarely cheap (for example Midland Mainline and Virgin) and that if your whole journey can only be provided by one operator it is usually cheaper (if you can spare the time and changes) to break it down into different steps.

Another thing shown is that the cheap fares rarely seem available how ever early you get on!

I sometimes use the North London line (Silverlink) from West Hampstead having started at Luton or St Albans.

Tickets are understandably cheaper "via West Hampstead" as it is shorter than going into central London and out again. I travelled to Brentford by this route and the fare seemed cheaper than when I travelled to Acton Central by the same route last November. I checked on the web and this is so.

Current cheap day return fares (old network card) from St Albans to Acton Central are £4.25, Gunnersbury (two stops further) £3.95 and Brentford (further still) also £3.95.

Note that if you do not walk from Gunnersbury to Kew Bridge, as I did, you are entitled to travel to Richmond and then back on the Hounslow loop.

There may be reasons for this but on the face of it things like this seem pretty absurd.

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Rail woes

Most members of the public feel complete impotence and frustration in the face of politicians who simply take no notice of the people who elected them. Most of the rail industry was against rail privatisation, and so was most of the electorate.

We expected better things once New Labour came to power. But democracy in this country is a farce. It is a contradiction in terms to expect a private

company to provide a service, particularly a public service. The need to make a profit for shareholders, to cut costs to the bone, and so reduce staffing levels and thus have an over-worked and under motivated work force mean that service is cut to a minimum.

The result is expensive public transport.

If Railfuture donated all its revenue to the Labour party, would we then have a voice?

*Barry Fleming
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Manchester

I must put the record straight with regard to the article in *Railwatch 95* concerning rail services to the East Midlands. In the North Midlands branch of Railfuture we have been very concerned about the London St Pancras-Manchester service which is welcomed in this article as opening up "new journey opportunities".

In fact, as originally proposed the exact opposite could have been the case. There has been huge opposition to this locally.

As originally proposed, Beeston would have lost its London service and the Nottingham IC125 "could have been borrowed to go to Manchester leaving Nottingham with just an hourly Turbostar."

We also heard rumours at one time that Nottingham passengers would have to change at Leicester to get to London.

Petitions have attracted huge numbers of signatures and political opponents are united in their opposition to this plan. The local press has also been largely against the plan. It is said that Midland Mainline was impressed and taken aback by the petitions.

Meetings have been held with MML and it has changed some of its proposals.

As regards electrification, this is not something North Midlands branch sees as a priority. Long term, perhaps, yes.

We are concerned that this would make the service inflexible. We wish to see the introduction of through London trains to Mansfield. We welcome through trains to Matlock and other places.

If MML had been electrified then the Matlock service probably would not have happened and it would have weakened the case for Mansfield. It is also our worry that only the Sheffield route is electrified pos-



sibly giving another reason for Nottingham not having a through London service.

Paul Clark, vice chair, Railfuture North Midlands, Magnetic Resonance Centre, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD

Editor's note: This letter was written before the timetable was published.

Rail versus air

Those of us who hoped rail might eventually recapture some of the custom recently lost to the "no frills" airlines (helped by fuel at 1p per litre) may have to redouble their efforts.

The recent Department for Transport aviation policy document for SW England makes the following dubious claim:

Although "rail provides a viable alternative to air on shorter journeys, especially those under two hours, with many rail journeys from the SW to London being over three hours, there will remain a need for an air service to London".

In addition it makes the unbelievable claim:

"Short-haul air services are unlikely to generate worse environmental impacts per passenger kilometre than diesel trains used throughout the region."

This is all a depressing contrast with France where rail has been heavily encouraged for energy-efficiency and other environmental reasons, to such an extent that domestic air services have dwindled, leaving airports free to accommodate international services for which air is the only choice.

John Davis, 41 Fairmead Avenue, Harpenden, Herts AL5 5UD

First step

It's good to see the reopening of Chandler's Ford. Another good move would be to improve the service from Basingstoke via Salisbury as far as Exeter St Davids.

The line wants doubling up from Wilton South, with third-rail electrification. All the original station sites are still there and can be reopened. Salisbury has spare platform capacity.

David Giles, Flat 1, 36 Winn Road, Southampton, SO17 1EQ

Eurostar prices

If Eurostar had adopted the pricing policy used by the budget airlines (the further in advance you book your ticket the cheaper it is) from the outset it would be turning in a regular profit by now, and the likes of EasyJet and Ryanair may never

have got off the ground. However, nothing will change until British Airways removes itself from the consortium as, I believe, its presence is anti-competitive as it has a foot in both camps. They could do worse than invite Mr Stelios who started Easyjet and has gone on to do similar things to the car rental, internet café and (soon) the cinema business. I bet he could show Eurostar how to make the service profitable.

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Euro tickets

I raised the difficulty of booking through to Cologne in Germany at the National Express shareholders' AGM (who jointly own Eurostar). After the meeting Richard Goldson, Rail Development Director, came up to me and noted more details and expressed his surprise.

I now have a letter from him confirming the current situation and explaining that Eurostar staff are working hard on it but for unknown reasons are having more difficulty negotiating this with other international trains like Thalys than they had with other Thalys destinations like the Netherlands.

I actually got my tickets through German Railways in the UK, using the email address provided in the last *Railwatch*, which was a lot less hassle than phoning RailEurope (who don't do email or postal bookings). Furthermore German Railways, unlike RailEurope, were able to do internal German reservations. They did everything very quickly and efficiently, unlike a small specialist travel company I found who did my tickets last year, took ages, and made a few small errors.

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Reopening appeal

The Bedfordshire Railway & Transport Association is appealing for donations to the Bedford-Northampton Rail Link Study Fund.

BRTA is seeking to raise £2,000 to enable the second stage pre-feasibility study to go ahead. The study will look at the merits of reopening the Bedford-Northampton rail link and boost efforts to argue the case for protection of the old route and ade-

quate spaces where blockages exist. So far BRTA has raised £800 and needs another £1,200 for the study to go ahead.

BRTA believes a reopened Bedford-Northampton rail link would be a boost to Bedford in terms of bringing new flows of customers to local shops and businesses minus their cars, reduced traffic congestion and direct access by rail from Bedford to Northampton and the Virgin rail network to places like Birmingham, the National Exhibition Centre, Manchester and Glasgow, saving the drive and parking hassle at Milton Keynes. Donations are welcome. Cheques should be made payable to BRTA. Please mention the Bedford-Northampton rail link study.

Richard Pill, BRTA, 4 Rowlandson Way, Manton Heights, Bedford MK41 7LT

Bluebell extension

Thank you for reporting (*Railwatch 95*) the defeat of Sainsburys' plans to frustrate the extension of the Bluebell Railway through to East Grinstead. Now, however, the extension is under threat from another direction.

The report of the examination in public into the West Sussex structure plan states: "The potential for a new station off the B2110 should be investigated together with the prospect of a shuttle service into the town to link up with the London trains."

If implemented, this could only be another version of the existing bus link to Kingscote station, conferring none of the benefits for the South Central service that are expected from the extension and giving the Bluebell no advantages either.

MJ Leppard, Public Transport Coordinator for East Grinstead, 20 St George's Court, East Grinstead, Sussex, RH19 1QP

Booking problems

The method of booking tickets for rail is ridiculously expensive and inflexible compared to air. The rail industry is missing a trick here and doing themselves out of huge potential profits and passenger numbers.

In March I tried to book a sleeper for London to Edinburgh for July, but it was impossible to book because they were only booking tickets until

mid-May. Even if I had booked in May it would have cost well over £140. Because of the inflexibility and cost, I decided to go with a budget airline instead.

I could book many months in advance and booking months in advance gave me a ticket costing under £60. The air companies are able to offer low prices for forward advance tickets because they recognise that it is very profitable for someone to pay for something six months before they get it. This represents good cash flow and accounts receivable policy.

I can't understand why the railways do not have this kind of flexibility. They are missing out on a big opportunity in terms of profitability and a big opportunity for gaining some market share back in the UK domestic travel market. At the moment, the airline industry seems to be winning against rail.

Does anyone know why the railways are so inflexible? The old argument for privatisation is that it leads industries to be more flexible and meet customer needs better. This thinking doesn't seem to be applied to rail.

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Railcard for drivers

I welcome the campaign for a national railcard, as someone who is neither young nor senior.

But I would be put off a card linked to a commercial bank, as in the "credit card option" described in *Railwatch 95*.

The suggestion that car drivers should get a free railcard also causes me concern. Drivers have not paid their contribution to transport infrastructure costs if you consider the sheer environmental harm caused by roads and the vehicles on them.

What's more, the poorest section of the community, those who can't afford to run a car even if they wanted to, would be automatically excluded.

Tim Mickleburgh, 33 Littlefield Lane, Lincolnshire DN31 2AZ

Insurance poser

The Environmental Transport Association campaigns for saner transport and also provides travel insurance. Could Railfuture co-operate with the ETA to provide insurance for rail travel? It might attract more Railfuture members.

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