

Rail is on the up and up

British trains are carrying more people than at any time since the Second World War on a much reduced network.

New services are being introduced and even long-neglected lines are beginning to realise their potential after some simple marketing.

The future also looks bright with cars jammed on a road to nowhere and information technology, and the importance of the environment will put rail at the heart of the national public transport system.

That was the upbeat message for more than 100 delegates who attended the 2004 rail users conference at Birmingham on 6 November.

Adrian Lyons, director general of the Railway Forum, said it had been a roller coaster ride since privatisation but the media are beginning to concede that we are getting our act together and "we are being given the benefit of the doubt".

There are still problem areas. The Government will not consider any

RAIL USERS CONFERENCE BIRMINGHAM

sponsored by Chiltern Railways, Arriva Trains Wales and Orange

expansion of the network until costs have radically come down. And there is no national strategy for the railways.

But 25 million people live near the West Coast main line and rail's penetration into that market is minimal at present.

Yet in places like Milton Keynes it is sometimes impossible for all the potential passengers to get on to the train. Capacity is a problem and high-speed rail would help solve that problem while also transforming Britain.

The Spanish Madrid-Seville high-speed line has brought tremendous traffic growth. Innovative marketing has helped. If the train is more than 30 minutes late, passengers get all their ticket money back.

David Keay, principle inspector of Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate also hinted that there would be a more realistic approach to rail-

way safety in future. Even barrow crossings, as long as there are proper safety audits and sensible use of auxiliary equipment, like warning lights linked to signals, could well have a future in new stations.

This is essential because the cost of providing extra lifts or bridges often outweighs the justification for opening the station.

Sheila Dee of the Shrewsbury-Chester Rail Partnership told how her down-to-earth approach to promoting local services has boosted passenger numbers.

She described how rail information often used to be kept "secret", being only available at the rail station.

She made sure timetables were put up in shops and local libraries. She also introduced mini timetables the size of a credit card.

She said you have to keep reminding people the cost of rail fares is

often cheaper when petrol and parking is taken into account.

After hearing of Sheila's success the conference was given another encouraging speech from Allan Dare, business development manager of Chiltern Railways.

He said: "We target the M40. We want to get cars off that motorway."

And he reminded campaigners fighting busways that busways have got a long history of failure.

The Clubman train was introduced to match an executive's saloon car and overall Chiltern had increased the size of its train fleet by 300%.

He added: "We have financed, led and project managed our own infrastructure improvements."

"We are very proud of being railway people. Railways are a long-term business and we have to plan for the long-term."

He said he had to keep reminding people that Birmingham is the size of many European capitals and it relies on its railways.

Open borders for Euro rail

By Trevor Garrod

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Road transport has swiftly taken advantage of the opening of borders across the European Union and its eastward enlargement.

Now national rail operators are being urged to look beyond their own frontiers.

The call came at the Salzburg Transport Conference in October which also highlighted the scope for international rail companies to run passenger and freight trains.

The theme of the conference was *By Train and Bus through Europe without Borders*.

Organised by Railfuture's Austrian sister organisation in cooperation with three local bodies, and with sponsorship from 14 other bodies, the event attracted over 100 participants from the rail industry, local authorities and the voluntary sector.

I was invited as chairman of the European Passengers Federation to present a paper, as was our administrative council member Dr Albert Lambert from Luxembourg.

Participants came not only from German-speaking countries but also from Luxembourg, the Czech Republic and the UK.

It is difficult to do justice to the full and well-organised two-day programme, but a complete illustrated report will be available (in German) early in the new year. Meanwhile, here are some salient points.

Speakers from two leading firms, Siemens and Bombardier, gave



Picture: TREVOR GARROD

Participants in the Salzburg transport conference board a special train at Oberndorf station to take them on the Salzburg Local Railway into the city on 15 October 2004. The train belongs to the Bayrische Oberland Bahn and was brought to Salzburg specially for the event.

presentations on the challenges facing the industry and how they were responding with new locomotives and rolling stock which could operate on more than one country's network. Another contributor outlined the potential of the Spanish Talgo trains for international travel.

Several speakers analysed the relative strengths and weaknesses of rail and air for many of the journeys within Europe. There was also a widespread feeling that rail must have a level playing field on which to face its competitors.

The tax exemption for aircraft fuel (dating from the Chicago Agreement of 1944) needs to be looked at again, at least for shorter journeys. We have to persuade MEPs

and national politicians to create a political and financial framework to encourage international rail development. EPF, which brings together 16 associations from 11 countries including our own has been initiating dialogue with MEPs.

Many participants drew attention to the difficulties and anomalies in booking and pricing of international tickets.

The benefits and challenges of developing the East-West route from Paris to Budapest via Munich and Vienna were also explained and caused lively discussion. The two days were not all taken up with talking. Rides on the Salzburger Local Railway were also included. This electrified line serves commu-

nities to the north of the city, including Oberndorf, which was the conference venue for one day. On the other day we met at Laufen, its German neighbour just across the river. Much has been done in recent years to upgrade the SLB and 4.2 million passengers per year travel on its 20 miles of largely single track.

It provides freight services for several local firms and has taken advantage of liberalisation to cooperate with a privately owned German rail company to run regular freight trains between a variety of centres in Germany and Austria.

We were able to ride in a preserved vintage electric train from 1907 and to view three new multiple units which had been brought to Salzburg specially for the event.

One colleague at work was surprised to hear I was going to Salzburg by train. But why not? The travelling time from London is now less than 12 hours, mainly by high-speed Eurostar, Thalys and ICE3 train and it is easy to book a hotel in Brussels or Cologne for an overnight stay by phone or internet before you leave home.

I booked my tickets through Travel Cannon Ltd at Saxmundham Rail Station, Station Approach, Saxmundham, Suffolk, IP17 1BW Tel: 01728 604600.

New or improved lines and trains (and, for us British, the Channel Tunnel) have made European rail travel potentially even easier. Will the marketing staff and the politicians keep pace with the technical progress?