

What's going on? We should be told

Lessons are at last being learned it seems, with improved train performance following the introduction of new timetables in December.

South West Trains have a new timetable which is "clock face", but also based on sensible turn-rounds.

First Great Western and their Link services have started a successful marriage, though they got off to a shaky start, and believe me shaky starts to new timetables is not the prerogative of the privatised railway (I have been involved in some very difficult timetable changes). Certainly they have opened up the Berks and Hants westward with increased services and an innovative stopping pattern.

Chiltern line services generally work well, sticking to basic operating principles with no fancy turn-backs while continuing to look for new markets spreading out from Birmingham.

From a railway historical perspective – historical in the sense of going back 50 years – they comprise services coming off a Great Central trunk and spreading into former Great Western branches, north and west of Birmingham, the traditional Great Western towns of Kidderminster and Stourbridge.

Chiltern rarely get a mention from me because they do not often sin in performance terms. Neither should they really since they inherited new trains and new signalling when they started. Still, judging by other people's efforts, they could easily have messed it all up by now.

I propose in the spring to go back to my former workplaces in the North

because this column is in danger of not going north of Birmingham!

Talking of Birmingham, Virgin's West Coast and CrossCountry services are still hit and miss, sometimes wonderful, sometimes awful.

The bus industry and taxi drivers benefit from these failures regularly.

Would you believe that taxis are brought in from outside the area when local firms could benefit from the work?

I was unlucky enough to be involved in a Virgin muddle which involved a taxi ride. The cabman told me he pays over £200 for a licence to ply for trade at the station.

And yet Virgin bring outsiders in, presumably through the bus-cab world of their so-called Service Partners – another name for bus operator.

My favourite performer, and perhaps not all will agree but we must speak as we find, is GNER which retains good traditional railway values like whistle blowing and standard restaurant services of high quality.

Traditional values takes us back to the dying throes of John Major's last government which I remind you again got us in this mess in the first place.

Thinking about governments brings me to the present Government and its transport policy.

I was the last divisional manager on the BR South Eastern, a very difficult but rewarding railway to work on. When I say rewarding, I mean to those who were proud to operate it, not that the money

rewards were high. It has achieved considerable improvements since it was put back into a form of nationalisation (let us say the word).

If any government should be proud of that, it is a Labour government, but is it proud?

It seems however that the Government is not pleased. Rather it is anxious to put the service back out to a franchise – probably with the profitable suburban high-speed services to operate over the Channel Tunnel rail link tacked on.

I could even guess who will get it and in fact will put a name in an envelope to be opened after the choice is made. Some rewards in life come to those who earn them and some to those who keep their heads down!

Perhaps I should keep my head down and go on with the good news. Good news if you are Scots that is, for Mr Darling appears to do more in Scotland for rail than he does for those living elsewhere.

I understand large sums of money have been transferred to Scotland to help, according to the Edinburgh Evening News, the reopening of the Waverley route. Let us hope it happens for its loss was a tragedy equalled only by the loss of the old Midland and Great Northern for which we have Dr Beeching to thank. I do not suppose the supporters of the South Hampshire Rapid Transit in Wessex branch are thrilled in view of Mr Darling turning down their scheme.

We must not forget Mr Darling is an Edinburgh MP and indeed Secretary of State for Scotland as well as Secretary of State for Transport.



Rayner's Review

It is said to have been difficult to get the money. Not for Mr Darling surely. He just took it out of one pocket and put it in another.

Thinking about Beeching and the closures in his name makes us sad or angry according to our nature.

However Dr Beeching closed railways publicly and allowed us to know what he was doing.

I worry now that with the Department for Transport taking over, and with an engineering-led non-commercially orientated subversive Network Rail, coupled with the Treasury-led desire to save money and run buses, we are in a less honest world than the world of Dr Beeching.

■ Peter Rayner is a former British Rail operations and safety manager.

Rail users' call to arms

By Tony Smale
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While rail user groups generally welcome the SRA's Community Rail Development initiative, it is clear from newsletters and bulletins reaching me that many have serious concerns about measures to drive down costs and the prospect of a deteriorating service.

Even commentators in the trade press see in the initiative a threat of bus substitution, a view reinforced by the Government's apparent desire to streamline the line closure procedure through its Railways Bill.

History tells us that if you want a successful low-cost railway, you first need to invest in signalling systems or

appropriate rolling stock.

Just spending less on infrastructure and keeping life-expired trains on the tracks simply leads to more breakdowns, deters passengers and puts off the inevitable day when the cost of renewals has to be faced.

The Strategic rail Authority hopes that community groups will want to take on some of the responsibility of running secondary lines.

That may be fine for organisations that have experience of adopting stations, taking on publicity work and running excursion trains.

Many groups around the country would struggle to recruit enough foot soldiers to take on any of this

extra work. It's not just on branch lines where local groups will find themselves putting in that little bit extra over the coming months.

There may be threats to the level of service on some of our main lines as well, as the new rail branch of the Department for Transport looks for ways to cut its cloth.

So, in the next franchising round, we can expect to see timetable reductions and less expectation of service development.

Extra vigilance will be needed to defend "peripheral" operations such as long-distance services and late evening trains.

And with the loss of regional Rail Passenger Committees, the new centralised RPC will

be increasingly looking to Railfuture branches and rail user groups to monitor and report on rail services around Britain.

It is not a time to sit on the sidelines. Our railway needs active support more than ever!

Get involved

If you have a little time to spare – perhaps to help with a survey or to assist with stalls at summer events – then I'm sure your local Railfuture branch or rail user group would be very pleased to welcome you on board.

Contact details can be found from the RPC website at <http://www.railpassengers.org>

Click on the site map and follow the link to user groups.

Briefly

Bustitution

Most Railfuture members know that replacing trains with buses is a transport policy going nowhere. But there are whispers inside the Government and even among train operators that buses are still seen as a solution.

Railfuture's Norman Bradbury has taken another look at the issue and has produced a six-page briefing paper. By the time you read this, the paper should be available on the Railfuture website. If you require a paper copy, please contact Railfuture admin (for contact details, see page 2).

Government rail chiefs

Former British Rail employee Mike Mitchell has been appointed director general of railways at the Department for Transport. Dr Mitchell, who was chief operating officer for FirstGroup, starts work in Whitehall on 1 May.

The other Government rail directors are Graham Dalton, projects, Mark Lambirth, strategy and finance, Gary Backler, service delivery, Peter McCarthy, customer and stakeholder relations, Richard Horton, procurement.