



BREATHING SPACE: Berney Arms station in rural Norfolk allows city residents to access the countryside without a car. The car brings danger, pollution and environmental damage and threatens fragile landscapes

Picture: Ian Dinmore, the Wherry Lines Rail Partnership

Priceless asset

By Guy Hardy and Ray King

Not even the most enthusiastic rail supporter would these days probably campaign to build a new rail station in the middle of the countryside. But for various reasons, tiny stations do exist in many parts of the country.

Most of us cherish these as valuable assets, environmentally friendly gateways for town and city dwellers to enjoy the countryside.

Comparatively they cost very little to keep open but they would cost an absolute fortune to recreate. But all round Britain there are threats to these precious railway assets.

In south-west Wales there is considerable concern over warnings by Government ministers of substantial cuts in subsidy which the Treasury hopes to "achieve" in 2009.

The sums involved are enormous and, to be achieved, must involve big changes in the network. These worries were enhanced by the Department for Transport's closure of Etruria station "with less than 22 passengers a day". There are many

stations in Britain with ridership around this level.

According to *The Times*, the department has a team of bean counters examining the finances of rural and secondary lines that is holding secret meetings with train companies to see how savings can be achieved.

No passenger train wheel turns west of Swansea without government subsidy.

Given the population levels in the area this is a situation that is likely to continue and it seems odd that the way the railways are run continues without any reform or examination of possible cost reductions.

There is no doubt that privatisation has substantially increased the costs of operating the railway and that the maintenance holiday enforced in the final Provincial-Regional sector days of British Rail distorted what the real costs might be.

Volunteers will ensure that passenger trains will continue. The local network is currently continuing to see increases in ridership. This has been achieved despite a rough patch

in the current Arriva Trains Wales franchise when unsuitable rolling stock, which never appeared under the previous National Express operator, has been used on west Wales services resulting in low quality journeys and severe overcrowding on some services.

Hopefully the travelling experience will be enhanced by the introduction of the standard pattern timetable and class 175 units in December although concerns with capacity remain on the Pembroke and Tenby line.

Transport Secretary Alistair Darling seemed to make a move in the right direction when the Community Railways concept was announced.

If rural areas such as west Wales are to retain rail services in the light of the Treasury's aspiration for subsidy reductions, community railways will have to save lots of money. Any railway can be an economic powerhouse for its region, and volunteer railways, such as the West Somerset and the North York Moors, have become crucial to the local economy. In public railway

transport we now need to look at hybrid solutions. We can no longer assume that our rural and secondary lines are guaranteed a long-term future.

Railfuture campaigners may have to be more pro-active.

Some local railways could provide freight services. To help, the Association of Community Rail Partnerships has launched a new guide to ways of getting freight on to rail.

Rail Freight: a toolkit guide for community groups and rail partnerships is a step-by-step guide to ways in which local communities can help.

"It's aimed at a non-specialist readership, a kind of beginner's guide to rail freight," said ACoRP's general manager Paul Salveson. "It's for all those people who'd like to see rail moving a greater share of freight traffic, with the enormous environmental benefits this would bring to local communities."

The guide costs £10 from ACoRP, Rail and River Centre, Civic Hall, 15a New Street, Slaithwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5AB. More info: www.acorp.uk.com

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