

Rails at risk again

By Ian McDonald

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Despite many rail closures, alignments have often survived for many years. Now is the time for these old railway lines to be considered for reopening.

But Railfuture is concerned that many plans submitted by its members' local groups, or by other transport and environmental groups for extending the railways, are often crushed by alternative building redevelopment.

Housing, retail and industrial plans have been given approval, even though they may lie on the route of proposed new, or reopened, railway alignments, which groups like Railfuture believe would contribute positively to provide new or improved local train services.

Many such lines, often only short connections between two separate railway routes for example, may be relatively cheap to construct, compared to other grandiose road schemes of similar route length, and instead bring real benefits in urban areas, particularly where traffic congestion and pollution cause chaos and poor air quality.

However, powerful and influential property redevelopers' plans seem to receive more sympathetic treatment from central Government – even if local authorities also support an alternative railway development – on the grounds that Network Rail and the Department for Transport “currently” have no plans for “such a railway link”.

This shortsightedness by central government must cease, and it should consider thoroughly such railway proposals, whether supported by local authorities or not, if necessary at a public inquiry, before allowing building developments which would permanently frustrate such environmentally sound schemes.

Railfuture can provide examples where this has occurred already. The public often do not hear about these alternative options. It is time for a change in the planning rules.

Now the DfT has set up a Property Review Group which it says will “determine whether sites owned by the British Rail Residuary Board should be retained for transport use, offered to the rail industry, devolved administrations or local authorities or released for open market disposal”.

The DfT adds: “To facilitate communication with interested parties a website has been set up with details of consultations commenced in 2006 (current and closed) and will also record decisions reached by PRG to release sites. A copy of the Guidance from the Department for Transport establishing the group is available on the website, www.railprg.org.uk



BRIGHT FUTURE: Richard Crane with the train named after him

Pictures: Michael Burgoyne

Local hero

Rail campaigner Richard Crane was stunned to be honoured in May after 25 years of fighting to safeguard the future of his local line.

Fellow members of the Bedford to Bletchley Rail Users Association managed to keep secret the fact that Silverlink had agreed to name a train after their founder and chairman until the day of the ceremony at Bletchley.

Richard, who worked for British Rail until being made redundant at the time of privatisation said: “I was asked to pull the chord and was gritting my teeth because I thought they might have chosen some corny name. I was stunned. I had no idea what was planned.”

He added: “I hope I have contributed to the line remaining open and being invested in. But it is also recognition for all the other people who have joined in the work along the track.”

Route director Mark Steward said: “Richard Crane never lost faith in the line and fought strenuously for



Richard's class 150 train at Bletchley station

its survival. He has been a valuable critic and supporter of Silverlink. We learnt over the years that BBRUA wanted constructive and respectful dialogue.”

See also Richard's letter Modernisation: Page 9

By Jim Walker

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While the UK was suffering rain and cold back in May, 19 Railfuture members enjoyed sun and 78-year-old trams of northern Italy.

We travelled by Eurostar to Paris, then on to Basel for the night. Next morning we reached Milan, via the spectacular St Gotthard pass.

Milan is a city of four million people and has a three-line metro network and seven suburban rail-

Sunshine and old trams

way lines. Italy also has its own high speed trains, similar to TGVs, somewhat confusingly called Italian Eurostars, to Turin and Rome.

Almost all mainline trains run from the huge Milan Central station which was planned in 1902 and built in the 1930s.

The train shed is one of the largest in Europe. We were entertained by

our Italian sister organisation, the Associazione Utenti del Trasporti Pubblico.

Most tram routes have modern low floor trams but they are still operating many old trams (some from 1928) through the old part of the city. If you want to ride through an interesting city on a beautiful old tram with wooden seats go to Milan!