

railwatch

AN INDEPENDENT VOICE FOR RAIL USERS

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Picture: Ray Bentley

What a big letdown

This beautiful scene should warm any rail campaigner's heart – a train doing a good job serving a rural area where the roads are narrow and cannot absorb any more cars and lorries.

But all is not as it seems at Calstock, on the border between Devon and Cornwall. For this picture was taken when the peak service was operated by two-carriage class 150 trains.

Someone came up with the idea of running a one-carriage class 153 on the train which arrives in Plymouth at 08.19. The result is that on busy journeys it is overcrowded, with 40 people standing by the time the train gets to Devonport. On other

less busy services, a two-car class 150 is run. After protests, First Great Western now says that in May it will be able to run a class 150 on the morning peak train.

But similar overcrowding occurred on many parts of the network following timetable changes.

Maybe the situation at Calstock was unavoidable but there is a whole range of other devices which railway planners and managers can and have employed to deter people from travelling by rail.

This kind of penny pinching pretends to be prudence but is actually profligacy. It is wasting an expensive asset – the railway – and depriving it of the tools to do its

job properly just when there is rising demand for rail travel as people wake up to the environmental and social consequences of driving their cars everywhere.

The most obvious trick that deters people from going by train is to make it too expensive and it appears that the Department for Transport is delighted to use this tactic when it should be expanding rail capacity.

There has been an unholy alliance between the Government and train operators to keep British train fares high.

They hide behind the smokescreen that cheap fares are available in advance. As usual that is a half-truth. Too few cheap tickets are

available and many people pay too high a price for choosing to travel the green way – by train.

Even when Railfuture showed that a national railcard would be an economic and financial success, both Government and operators chose to ignore the evidence.

Ray Bentley's picture shows Calstock Viaduct, built in 1908 to link the old East Cornwall Mineral Railway to the Plymouth, Devonport and Southwest Junction Railway. The viaduct was built from concrete blocks, cast on the Devon bank.

railfuture