

# We need walk-on tickets

By Mike Crowhurst

## Railfuture chairman

Rail campaigners are often accused of dwelling on the negative and not giving credit when it is due, and to be fair, there is sometimes truth in this.

So it is with some hesitation that I am going public with what I believe could turn out to be a serious threat to our railways and the way we use them.

For once it is not the conventional threat to cut services or close "underused" branch lines.

Mind you there are continuing efforts from some quarters to pave the way for closures by withdrawing the best-used trains.

Then there are the amazing comments about closures by outgoing Network Rail boss John Armitt.

[Mr Armitt is reported to have said that some trains could be replaced by buses and taxis]

He for one should have learned that, as the Northern Rail Review showed, when the crunch comes there is little scope for cutting costs in this way anyway.

No, now there is a different sort of threat, but no less dangerous in my view.

When we met Passenger Focus just before Christmas, they told us that they had detected a strand of thinking in the Department for Transport that favoured moving towards an all pre-booked railway – and no, they do not mean just inter-city!

The idea seems to be that commuters would have to buy season tickets either for specified trains or at best a narrow band (priced accordingly) and that if they wanted to travel outside that band they would be charged a hefty surcharge.

So if you have to be at work by 09.40 and the 08.41 train is fully booked, you will have to travel at 07.00, or 06.00!

If you think about it, it's not beyond the bounds of possibility given advances in ticketing technology. But what about rural services, one might ask. Well, you've all got internet access, haven't you, so you can all book ahead, and if you can't print your own tickets, you can pick them up at collection points, can't you?

Of course many people do not have access to the internet.

This is of course the sort of thinking that could only come from people who never use any form of public transport except aviation, and assume that the "problem" of the railways can be solved by inflicting the disadvantages of air transport on rail.

From a planner's point of view, it is of course all about tailoring supply to fit demand, or to put it another way, not "carrying fresh air around" as we have heard ad nauseam recently from ministers.



**STEP ONE:** Buying tickets should be quick and easy if more people are to travel by train

It would of course suit the operators fine, because they would (in theory) know in advance just how many people would be on each train, assuming of course that the reservation system can be made to work reliably.

In practice I suspect that "last minute" booking on board would still be possible outside peak times at least on local services, but only if seating space is available and no doubt at a surcharge.

Safety fanatics campaigning for seat belts on trains after incidents like Ufton Nervet risk unwittingly furthering the process, as once seat belts were made compulsory, standing passengers would be banned just as they are on aircraft.

The next step does not take much imagination. Operators would soon announce that booking offices were "no longer economic", and close all but main travel centres in the cities.

It is the same process by which supermarkets have killed local village shops, mobile phones have killed phone booths, cars are killing public transport, and so on.

Despite residual demand from technophobes and "neo-Luddites" like myself, the old technology is soon declared uneconomic as each new one arrives and takes over.

Fans of internet ticketing should bear this in mind! No wonder we hear constant rumours of threats to Saver tickets despite lip-service to keeping them!

Supersavers have all but gone already. Abolishing Savers would be a logical next step on this slippery path! Passenger Focus says

that it will fight this, but we do wonder just how hard the battle would be.

As we have already detected in their own thinking a worrying enthusiasm for the sort of technology that would pave the way for it, so we cannot be entirely confident of their support.

Of course the optimistic interpretation is that this is all just "blue skies thinking" of the sort beloved of ivory-towered academic "think tank" or cocooned civil-servants – the sort that produced mad ideas like poll tax and railway privatisation!

It all begins to have a sickening logic. The next clues will come this summer with the promised government railway strategy, the "high level output statement" in New Labour-speak.

Meanwhile all we can do is be vigilant, be ready to fight any threats to Savers and walk-on fares generally,

cultivate and brief sympathetic MPs (especially when the next election looms), and don't book your holidays for July!

In the meantime we already have a government that believes in "hands-on" micromanagement of the railways through the franchising process, the sort of "command and control" that Sir Alastair Morton constantly inveighed against, and a civil service that has already demonstrated to the dissatisfaction of everybody in the West Country that they know everything about how not to run a railway.

When we commented on this to Rail Minister Torn Harris, his reaction was "is it not the Government's job to govern?"

OK, so all complaints about service cuts, overcrowding, retimings on the railways, henceforth straight to Tom Harris, DfT, Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DR with a copy to your local MP.



InterRail and EuroDomino rail passes are changing from 1 April. The Inter Rail Global Pass is now valid in 30 countries, including Spain, France and Italy. For five days of travel across Europe within 10 days an adult will pay £179.30. Ten days of travel within 22 days will cost £258.50.

The Inter Rail One Country Pass is valid for three, four, six or eight days of travel within a month in any one of the 30 InterRail countries. The price will depend on the country.

Germany, France, Great Britain, Norway and Sweden are in the highest price category. A three-days in a month pass for Germany costs £136.10 or £90 for those under 26. <http://www.interrailnet.com/>

Information supplied to *Railwatch* by German Railways.