



Picture: Gail Hodgkiss

Waiting for a train: The young ones

Many children do not get the chance to enjoy trips by rail these days because rail travel can be so expensive parents feel they often have no option but to bustle them into the car. It's not surprising that "are we there yet?" is often the plaintive cry from the back seat.

For most children, rail is a much more pleasant, friendly and interesting way to go. But schools tend to use private hire coaches for trips even when a good public transport alternative exists by bus or train.

But these lucky four- and five-year-olds were given the opportunity to go by train for a school project. The group of school children from Grove Infant School in Malvern had fun learning all about the railway when they travelled on their local Central Trains service.

Central Trains arranged for free tickets for 36 pupils aged four and five, and six teachers to travel from Malvern Link to Great Malvern station. They were met by staff who gave them a tour of the station and talked to the children about the railways. They also got the chance to meet Central Trains' Kids Club mascot Travelling Trevor. Central Trains Route Manager Ben Farley said: "It's great to be able to give children an insight into our work." Teacher Gail Hodgkiss said: "The children were really excited as

most of them had never been on a train before. It was great for them to actually experience the railway for themselves."

And what about their future?

Rail campaigners have been waiting far too long for a big expansion of rail services, one of the few guaranteed ways of combating global change.

We are promised a Government "high-level output specification" in the summer which will give us some idea of what rail projects it has been persuaded to support.

In the autumn will come the Government spending review which will allocate cash. But at long last there are signs some visionary thinking is starting to take place. Regional rail assessments are being compiled and even the Association of Train Operators has published its *Exploring the Potential* which shows the Government how it could easily expand rail services. <http://www.atoc-comms.org/dynamic/publications/16/Exploring-the-Potential>

But the Government is still worried about public money being wasted in the rail set-up it has cre-

ated. The railways are now sucking up public money at the rate of £4.4 billion a year.

Rail Minister Tom Harris does not seem to grasp the importance of rail fares being affordable for ordinary people, brushing off complaints about 20% rises imposed by South West Trains on mid-morning services and the abolition of Super Savers by Arriva Trains Wales which has led to 34% rises in some cases. He said in May he was not bothered about unregulated fares.

In its shake-up of rail fares the Government looks set to make passengers pay even more for the privilege of going green.

The Office of Rail Regulation has however called for an investigation into claims that three banks – HSBC, Abbey and the Royal Bank of Scotland – are overcharging operators by up to £177 million a year for train leasing. Train operators pay £1 billion a year in leasing charges.

There were even hints of "renationalisation" but reports that Scotland is set to be the proving ground have been played down by Network Rail, which is denying allegations that deputy chief executive Iain Coucher has been in private talks with politicians. One report suggested that the changeover could come in 2011, when First ScotRail's franchise comes to an end.