

railwatch

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Reasons to be cheerful

Our page one picture shows intrepid members of the Portishead Railway Group committee braving the cold winter weather and gathering on the old trackbed after getting the warming news that it was all systems go for reopening their railway.

It might have been tempting to jump for joy but the trackbed of the former railway (where they were photographed) was slippery with ice, most of the people who have fought for the line are not in the first flush of youth – and there is still one hurdle for the 25-year-old campaign to jump.

The government has agreed to provide the last £30 million chunk of money needed to complete the project, which paves the way for construction to begin this summer.

The first passengers in over 60 years could be using the line between Bristol and Portishead by the end of 2027.

However, the business case still needs to be approved, hopefully



HS2 workers on the new Colne Valley viaduct on the London to Birmingham section of Britain's second high speed railway help launch the Railway 200 celebrations See also page 11

by the time this *Railwatch* is published. The good news originally came from West of England mayor Dan Norris, who announced in early February that a landmark agreement with the government had been reached.

The mayor had led crunch talks in London with rail minister Lord Peter Hendy and a week later he wrote to confirm the go-ahead.

The line first opened in 1867. The reopening of the railway,

which was axed back in 1964, will slash travel times in half, reduce car commuting by 5.5% and unlock an estimated £43 million in economic growth each year.

Our page one picture shows Railfuture's Wendy Thorne in red (centre) with Debbie Staveley, Rob Emony, Paul Gregory, Brian Hunt, Bob Wring, Dave Chillistone, Peter Maliphant, Colin Howells, Roger English and Gareth Jones.

www.portisheadrailwaygroup.org

Picture: HS2

Cheers ring out as Northumberland Line opens

By Dennis Fancett

Chair of the South East
Northumberland Rail User Group

The first phase of the Northumberland Line, linking Newcastle to Ashington, finally opened on 15 December, bringing about not the end, not even the beginning of the end, but perhaps the end of the beginning (as Winston Churchill might have put it) of the 19-year-long campaign from Railfuture-affiliated group SENRUG to see passenger trains reinstated on this working freight line.

Not the end, because even after the line is fully open SENRUG's campaigning work will continue. There are various extensions and additions not included in the core project that SENRUG wants to see added. It was heartening that at the formal opening ceremony with transport secretary Heidi Alexander at Ashington, three days before the first passenger train operated, both Conservative county council leader Glen Sanderson and Labour North East mayor Kim McGuinness expressed the desire to extend on to Newbiggin.

So there is a real political consensus on this. Less encouraging is that Ashington station has been designed and constructed with a bay platform rather than platforms on the running lines, which will make the onward extension more difficult and expensive than it needed to be.

But Newbiggin still remains the number one extension priority, along with Bedlington to Morpeth which Northern may well deliver anyway.

At present Newcastle to Morpeth trains sit idle in the Morpeth siding, and during this time the trains could easily run on to Bedlington and back.

SENRUG also wants to see a station added at Seghill, always part of its original campaign objective, and a new Metro service established between the airport and Blyth town centre, running on Northumberland Line tracks from Northumberland Park to Newsham, with a short section of new single track along the former alignment from Newsham to Blyth Town Centre.

Neither was 15 December the beginning of the end, since only one of the intermediate stations – at Seaton Delaval – opened. The remaining four (Bedlington, Blyth-Bebside, Newsham and the Metro interchange at Northumberland Park) are promised to come on stream at some stage during 2025, starting with Newsham, promised for early this year.

But no date for Newsham had been announced by early February. Questions were starting to arise as to why delays of weeks turn into delays of months. Notwithstanding all this, 15 December was a day of



Dennis Fancett and Northern's regional director Jason Wade at Newcastle on day one of the service to Ashington Picture: Northern

celebration. The first train departed from Newcastle at 0757. When Northern found out that I was not planning to be on the train, simply because there is no way of getting from my home town of Bedlington into Newcastle for that time, they very kindly provided a taxi for me, which I think demonstrates the constructive working relationship between the two organisations and their recognition that if it had not been for SENRUG's campaigning work, the opening would not be happening at all.

It was still dark when I arrived at Newcastle station around 0740

I had been requested by BBC Radio's *Broadcasting House* programme to record some audio transcripts of the atmosphere and feel of the opening, and I did the first of these as I walked into the station foyer, where the customer information system displayed the Ashington departure as on time.

Sadly, while the visual CIS was working fine, the platform and on-board audio announcements had not yet picked up the pre-recorded station names, so the 0757 was announced as going to nowhere!

Various jokes ensued with people reminding me that in darker times over the past 19 years, that is where we had also thought the campaign might be going too. But minor teething problems were not putting anyone off, and it was a real party atmosphere as increasing crowds gathered in the pre-dawn gloom.

The plan for the Northumberland Line is for two-coach trains, running every half-hour (hourly on Sundays). But Northern had

anticipated the extra crowds on the first few days and it was four coaches that pulled into Newcastle's platform 1, ready for the Ashington departure. Just as well, since when the doors finally opened and the crowds surged forwards in a mad scramble, it was difficult to find a seat. There was a spontaneous cheer as the train pulled out on time, many enthusiasts filming the moment, and me continuing to make and submit audio recordings to *Broadcasting House*.

A few more people got on at Seaton Delaval, then we continued northwards, myself ruefully admiring the end of my road as we went through the yet-to-be-completed Bedlington station site without stopping.

A few minutes later we arrived at Ashington to yet more applause and crowds waiting to get on

I returned straight back to Newcastle with a number of SENRUG committee members, also meeting some key people from the project and construction teams on board who have worked so hard to get us this far.

At Newcastle there was time for a quick coffee with SENRUG colleagues and a warm handshake with Jason Wade, Northern's regional director, before returning to Ashington for yet more press interviews, some on the train and some at the station.

The former Blyth & Tyne railway, which built most of the freight tracks on which the Northumberland Line now runs, had been very innovative. It

introduced an integrated system of stationary semaphore and lamp signalling before other companies. It also banned smoking on trains, 100 years ahead of its modern day counterparts. Additionally it was at the Bedlington Iron Works – over the site of which the line now passes as it crosses Furnace Bridge – that malleable rail was invented and patented, allowing railways to go round bends rather than dead straight wagonways, and it was this development that resulted in the explosion of railways around the world. The Northumberland Line has continued in this fine tradition of innovation by being the first rail reopening to deploy land value capture, an innovative system in which land owners near the route agree to make a financial contribution to the cost of the scheme if the go-ahead is given and the value of their land goes up as a result.

Yet another innovation has been to include the Northumberland Line within the Tyne and Wear Metro zonal ticket system, which means journeys can be paid for with the POP smart card. This is very welcome indeed and it also makes journeys much less expensive, though clearly local trains between Newcastle and Morpeth need to be included too, to avoid the obvious fares disparity between the two routes that is now occurring.

The total cost of reopening the Northumberland Line is now placed at £298 million. This leads many to ask: "Is it worth it?" Reopening an 18 mile length of existing freight track should never have cost that much, and the rail industry really does need to take a long hard look at itself, stop gold-plating solutions, and work out how to do things cheaper.

It must also be pointed out that an incredible range of unforeseeable technical challenges – ranging from unexploded bombs, mine underworkings and non-documented major water mains – has been discovered, all adding to the cost and creating delays which in turn add yet more costs.

But let me say this: here in South East Northumberland and Tyneside there are some key strategic roundabouts on the A1 and A19 trunk roads which seem to be updated and re-modelled every five years or so.

Each time, as far as I can ascertain, the cost is around £50 million per roundabout. So I like to think the Northumberland Line has cost the same as six roundabout upgrades. The Northumberland line has been worth every penny. Northern and Northumberland County Council are delighted with the 50,000 passengers who have used it in the first month – even before the remaining stations come on stream.

Steely survivor: Railway stands the test of time

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN
By Christian Wolmar

The *Railwatch* editor has asked me to look to the future. This is to mark the fact that the railways are celebrating their 200th anniversary. Actually I think 2030 is a better date, given the importance of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, rather than the ramshackle Stockton and Darlington Railway, but we won't go there.

In reality, trying to work out what the railways will be like in 200 years when our great grandchildren will all be dead is actually impossible.

Just try to think what railway pioneer Edward Pease and his fellow Quakers would think if they hopped down from heaven and took a look round at how their project had turned out. Much of today's railway would in fact be familiar to them, not least the 4ft 8½ inch gauge. Trains still run on metal wheels on metal tracks, carriages still transport people, goods travel in wagons and they are more economic than other forms of carrying goods.

OK, trains are rather bigger and faster, they have lots of equipment which would

bemuse Pease, and he would find the scale of the network absolutely bewildering. Nevertheless, they have survived because they have lots of advantages in the best things they do – heavy freight especially over long distances, inter-city travel, suburban commuting – over other modes. There is little to suggest that even in 200 years' time those advantages will not still pertain as they have over the past two centuries. So all I dare predict about 2225 is that railways will still exist. They are likely to be faster, more efficient and even safer than today, but that enduring technique of using metal – now steel – wheels on steel rails will endure. Indeed, I suspect many of the technologies being promoted or tried today will not become ubiquitous. Maglev, in particular, is an honourable failure, even in its 2.0 version as Hyperloop, once so extensively touted by that farcical speed freak Elon Musk. Those Maglev coaches which were promised to travel the 400 miles between San Francisco and Los Angeles in under an hour are never going to run. Not only are there seemingly insuperable technical difficulties, Maglev

trains require vast quantities of energy, cannot operate on routes requiring many junctions and are vulnerable in the case of collisions. They certainly do not represent the future. Nor do hydrogen trains whose economics, again, simply do not stack up and are dubious from an environmental point of view because of the difficulty of obtaining so-called green hydrogen cheaply. Do not, by the way, think that there is any 'sustainable' alternative to aviation fuel. Listen to my podcast *Calling All Stations* series 2, episode 9 for a very good debunking of the idea.

Hydrogen is another technological development that will not revolutionise transport in 200 years time. Nor, frankly, will our great great grandchildren be getting drone deliveries if they live in a city. Drones are very bad at knocking on doors or, indeed, at flying around lots of people and obstacles. As for flying taxis, they are called helicopters and are banned from town centres. And look where 20 years of driverless cars and hundreds of billions of dollars have ended up – a few robotaxis in a handful of American cities at permanent risk of being banned if they cause a fatal accident. You can get the gist of where this is going. Look at those

oft-screened scenes from the centre of London 100 years ago – there are buses, cars, bicycles, motor cycles and trams, and it is only the horses that have disappeared from our streets. Yes, I know, we do not have a lot of trams in London any more, but other cities do and we should have.

Trains may no longer be powered by coal and steam, but the stations in these clips are just as full today as they were then. So by and large, our forebears will not be flying around towns and cities using magic power packs on their backs as my childhood comics suggested. Instead, they will be taking the train for work and leisure, though

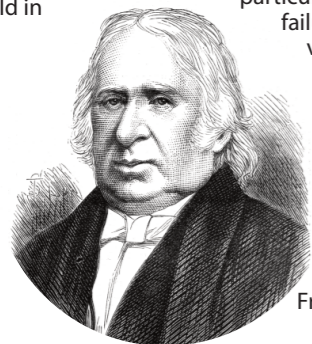
if present trends continue more for the latter than the former. Sure, those trains will be sleek and silent, elegant and economic, but they will still have bogies, windows, doors, though maybe not a driver in the cab.

We have to keep on campaigning. The railways we get restored will be there just as the Liverpool and Manchester mostly still is.

Railwatch readers can buy a signed copy of my latest book *The Liberation Line (Railwatch 181)* for a special price of £20 post free. Email christian.wolmar@gmail.com and put Railwatch offer in the header



Christian Wolmar



Quaker Edward Pease (1767-1858) from Darlington, was the main promoter of the Stockton and Darlington Railway, which opened in 1825. He is sometimes called the Father of the Railways

My journey to the clouds on a rail

Words and pictures by Trevor Jones



Trevor Jones

obviously a flat fare whatever the length of journey. Stopping off at one suburban station without barriers we had to validate our new journey on a machine inside the next train used. Suburban trains out of Retiro's

One of the remits of the Railfuture European Passengers working group of which I am secretary is to keep up to date with rail in other countries. Therefore, it seems worth reporting on my rail experiences in a small group tour run by Ffestiniog Travel in the autumn of 2024, travelling by train where possible from Buenos Aires to Machu Picchu in Peru via Bolivia. Being in a group, all our tickets were provided by the organisers, so I cannot report on buying tickets, which were generally flimsy computer printouts inclusive of required advance reservations. Buenos Aires has five railway termini, three of which are side by side and collectively known as Retiro station after the surrounding locality, walkable from the city centre. A SUBE card, which we were given with appropriate stored value, covers trips on the Metro lines and on suburban railways. Barrier card-reading gates let you in but simple turnstiles let you out, so it was

nearest and grandest station are third rail electric on Spanish broad gauge tracks and seemed never to get much above 30-40 mph. Across a broad gauge freight track running across the road without gates to the port is the second station, with diesel narrow-gauge suburban trains. The third and least grand station is served by diesel regional trains and occasional long-distance trains on broad gauge, joining the suburban electric tracks after a few miles.

Our first long-distance journey was the 314km to Rosario Norte, departing at 1930 (the only train that day) and scheduled to take 6.5 hours. Unfortunately it hit something on a level crossing,



Train to clouds: Comfort stop at 4,200 metres

adding two hours to the journey. It had a buffet car offering coffees but it accepted only Argentine money which we had been advised not to buy because of high inflation, or bank cards which did not work, probably due to lack of connection.

The next stage, to Villa Maria, was by tour bus because the only train ran only on two unsuitable days of the week and anyway would arrive at 0217. But we did have an 0700 service, on the only day of the week with a daytime train, for the 142km 4.5 hour journey thence to Cordoba, in what appeared to be

the very same carriage as used from Buenos Aires. It had been back to Buenos Aires, and then run overnight to Cordoba and back late next evening to Villa Maria.

Cordoba main (broad gauge) station had the air of a 19th century British station. From here, we had an approx 3½ hour 72km day trip by an overcrowded (but we in reserved seats) sunny Sunday morning narrow gauge train up to 1,000 metres in the nearby scenic mountains. We returned to Cordoba after

lunch more quickly by tour bus with a lakeside stop. This line appears to have two or three trains a day.

After flying to Salta (altitude 1,152 metres, and which has only short-distance local narrow-gauge trains) we had a day trip by tour bus following a narrow-gauge freight railway to a high altitude section for a Tren a las Nubes (train to the clouds) tourist train to go some miles further up to a viaduct at about 4,200 metres above sea level through fairly barren mountain scenery with a cloudless sky and clear views. If you were not on an

adventure around South America



Clouds viaduct on the rail line from Salta

organised tour, you could have bought a combined bus and rail return trip from a booking office at Salta station.

The next day's journey by tour bus to the Bolivian border (at 3,442 metres) followed a disused narrow-gauge railway, except for a short section turned into a vanity project (said our guide) tourist railway operated by solar power.

After crossing the border on foot without much hassle the following morning, we had the non-tourist railway highlight of the trip in a single carriage once-weekly railcar for the 289km 9.5 hour ride north from Villazon to a spectacular salt lake with an island of ancient cacti at Uyuni in the middle of Bolivia.

Actually I think it was half of a two-coach diesel multiple unit, given the connecting corridor but lack of driving cab at the rear, and a station notice in Spanish appearing to say the previous week's train was cancelled due to a technical

problem. The scenery was fantastic with a barren wide pass through mountains, alongside a winding river; then after dark the stars above and summer lightning over distant mountains.

We had a morning flight to La Paz, allowing the afternoon to tour its network of interconnecting cablecar lines that serve as the city's metro, giving splendid town and mountain views, including some snow-capped peaks. Lines go both steeply uphill, high

above the streets and on the level on pylons down the middle of a main street.

Paper ticketing from a booking office is three money units for your first line and +two for each successive stage of your continuous journey. Like Buenos Aires, a barrier gate lets you in to each stage but a turnstile lets you out. We visited the charming former main station, now a museum with some old carriages and electric locos. The early electric locos were used for the steep incline up on to the Altiplano plateau at about 4,000 metres above sea level, where the airport and sprawling suburbs are high above the city centre at 3,636 metres.

From La Paz we went to Puno on Lake Titicaca (two fifths the size of Wales, the highest navigable water in the world at 3,855 metres). We had separate tour buses each side of walking across the border into Peru, again without any hassle.



Villazon to Uyuni: A single-car ride was the highlight of my journey

Within Bolivia, the trip involved a short ferry crossing over a narrow strait of Titicaca, where the bus had one ferry boat to itself and we paid for a few extra "passengers" to "fill" vacant seats to expedite the departure of the next suitable passenger ferry. There used to be a long-distance train ferry connecting the railways of different gauges either side of Titicaca!

Puno to Cusco at 385 km and 10.5 hours was our longest train ride, in a luxury standard-gauge dining train similar to Pullman dining cars. There were three carriages, plus kitchen, baggage and bar cars, making six coaches, plus a loco. The bar car had space for dancing and, most memorably, an open rear end for viewing out the back, good for a few photographs of people setting up their market stalls again after the train had passed along a narrow shopping street in the main intermediate town. I think a triangular track layout would have

been used to turn the train round at Puno. Apart from service stops and a tourist stop at its highest altitude of 4,319 metres the train was non-stop and not available to local passengers. While there were obviously occasional freight services, judging by wagons seen in yards, there was no evidence of any other passenger train apart from a super-duper luxury sleeper train we passed. Both lunch and afternoon tea were served at our seats and included in the fare.

Cusco to Machu Picchu is about 75 crow km but 110km and five hours by narrow-gauge train from a different station. There are several zig-zag reversals up and down mountainsides, to its station Aguas Calientes deep in the valley below, from where there is a frequent bus service up the zig-zag road to Machu Picchu.

Apart from an organised Inca hike high up the mountains, that is the only way to get there. So well done public transport for South America's top tourist attraction, although you can cut out the zig-zags using road travel to a halfway point, as we did with our tour bus on the return, saving about an hour in the dark by then.

In Vista Dome carriages you get a light snack included in the fare, and the scenery is superb, climbing out of Cusco then dropping into the Sacred Valley towards the Amazon rainforest. Our tour ended with a flight to Lima, a night in the airport hotel, and flights home (as outwards) via Madrid.

A high speed trip on the future China-Singapore railway

By Ray Schofield in Laos February 2025

Laos was a country I had never had the pleasure of visiting, but I knew there was a nice piece of 160 kmh high speed railway from the Thai to Chinese border. So Laos it was.

It was convenient for me to fly to Udon Thani in northern Thailand, stay overnight near the station, and board train 133, the Bangkok to Vientiane sleeper train the following morning at 0707.

After an uneventful 50 minutes on board, we arrived at the Thai border station of Nong Khai. There was no explanation but everyone exited the train. I had obtained an e-visa to avoid queuing at the border and I was looking forward to re-boarding the train to travel over the road-rail Friendship Bridge.

But no! As I walked along the platform there was a sign about e-visas. Believe it or not, you cannot use e-visas on the train.

I suppose I could have queued up and paid another \$40 (£31) but I chose to follow the e-visa instructions. So I paid 50 THB (£1.20) for a shared tuk tuk to the Thai border post, and then 20 THB (50p) for a bus over the Mekong to the Laos immigration and customs office.

So, no more trains for now. The next day and a half were spent admiring the wide Mekong river, visiting the night market and tasting good bread and Beerlao IPA.

The following morning it was off to Vientiane rail station, the start of the Laos section of the new standard gauge high speed railway which goes from Vientiane to Boten on the Chinese



Ray Schofield



A freight train bound for China waits as my train to Vientiane arrives at Luang Prabang

border. Vientiane station is actually 15km from the city and also around 15km from the Khamsavath station where the metre gauge train from Bangkok terminates. The high speed line (single-track with passing loops) is fenced, has no level crossings and connects to the Chinese network for freight. Passenger trains do not work through.

I joined train C98, the 0730 departure. Tickets can be bought at the station but most passengers have pre-applied online for tickets which are e-mailed three days before travel.

The journey in second class was comfortable but I was told to arrive 30 minutes before departure to allow time for luggage to be x-rayed and e-ticket scanned.

I travelled by train as far as Luang Prabang, the old capital, and stayed in the heritage area sandwiched between the Mekong and a tributary. The station is well out of town.

Soon it was time for the train back to Vientiane and this time I was on D87 at 1449. A freight train going north, bound for China, was waiting at a signal as my southbound train arrived.

Picture: Ray Schofield

anthony.kay@railfuture.org.uk

Ivanhoe line North-West Leicestershire MP Amanda Hack is continuing her work with the Campaign to Reopen the Ivanhoe Line (CRIL) to restore passenger services to the railway between Leicester and Burton upon Trent. Having used her maiden speech in the House of Commons to point out the irony of having no stations in a constituency with a proud railway history back to the 1830s and with continuing rail-related business (Siemens at Ashby), she has met with rail minister Lord Hendy to promote the Ivanhoe line to his comprehensive review of capital transport projects. She has also run a transport survey among her constituents, gathering data to support the business case for the reopening.



Anthony Kay

Rail potential at West Burton Bassetlaw MP Jo White has called for a railway station to be opened at West Burton, on the line between Retford and Gainsborough, when the site of the decommissioned coal-burning power station is redeveloped for the Spherical Tokamak for Energy Production (nuclear fusion) project. The site will also become a centre of excellence for technologies related to nuclear fusion, so the project is expected to create up to 10,000 jobs. It is important to open a railway station at an early stage in the redevelopment, to provide access for construction workers.

More buses needed at Corby More and more passengers are using Corby station, which reopened 15 years ago, but passengers are calling for more car parking to encourage more rail use. Some are considering driving to other stations because of the parking problems at Corby. Railfuture campaigners have

suggested that existing bus services could be diverted to call at the station. Cycle paths to the station also need to be improved.

Carry on with electrification Completing the electrification of the Midland main line to Nottingham and Sheffield would bring economic benefits of £450 million, it is estimated. Network Rail is currently in the process of upgrading the line between Market Harborough and Wigston South. East Midlands mayor Claire Ward said: "The electrification of the Midland main line is a vital step in unlocking the full economic potential of our region."

Football clubs call for better rail Coventry City and Nottingham Forest football clubs have joined Coventry, Nottingham and Leicester city councils in an appeal to transport secretary Heidi Alexander to improve rail services in the Midlands region. They point out that there is no direct rail

East Midlands



connection between Coventry, Leicester and Nottingham, which have a combined population of over a million. They say football fans – and businesses – need a rail service every half hour, which would deliver around £180 million worth of social, environmental and economic benefits. They say every journey along this corridor taken by rail instead of car produces 80% less emissions.

www.railfuture.org.uk/East+Midlands+Branch
[X @RailfutureEMids](https://twitter.com/RailfutureEMids)



Railfuture in the news

BBC One TV celebrated the Northumberland Line reopening on its 12 February *Morning Live* programme. The show featured interviews with Andrew Carmichael from Railfuture-affiliated South East Northumberland Rail Users and Railfuture's national spokesman Bruce Williamson. The BBC reported on 17 December that GWR had provided a very poor Sunday service with many trains cancelled. Railfuture spokesman Bruce Williamson was interviewed on the BBC regional news programme *Points West* and on BBC Radio Bristol. He was also quoted on the BBC News website: "It's not a satisfactory situation where the train operators are saying 'don't use the trains'. In spring, rail fares will go up again by above inflation, and all of this is driving people off the railways and on to the roads, adding to more pollution and more congestion." The clips can be viewed at our "Railfuture in the news" web page.

Lottery winners

November: M Kneen, T Gauntlett, C Fribbins, D Hurdle, L Fryer, P Sherwood
December: M Hanson, S Boulding, D Stocks, W Morrison, G Smith, E James
January: M Kneen, JA Liston, M Geall, M Groll, W Thorne, L Butler

Join the Lottery

Railfuture Lottery profits go towards the Fighting Fund, which supports the campaigns our members are working on. For £12 per year for 12 entries, you can take part and could win one of six prizes every month. Multiple entries are possible. Taking part is easy – contact lottery@railfuture.org.uk and decide how many entries you want every month and how you would like to pay: via online banking, Paypal or cheque. With 72 winners every year and increased prizes in the December draw, give it a try – who knows, you could easily be a winner!

Cancelled due to a shortage of staff

By Neil Middleton

I want to set out some ideas for addressing that perennial loudspeaker announcement: "This train is cancelled due to a shortage of staff".

Is it time for railway workforce 2.0? The frequency of cancellations varies a lot depending on where you live, and comes and goes dependent on the season.

As I write this, cancellations on my local line due to insufficient staff are few and far between, but before Christmas the service was sometimes not fit for purpose because of cancellation rates.

Reliance on rest day working does not seem to work any more, although railway unions say train companies still prefer to keep small workforces reliant on overtime, rather than taking on the number of staff necessary to run a resilient service.

But that approach seems no longer valid, because sometimes staff are available and want the pay, but at other times personal commitments and preferences mean they do not want to work overtime.

It is becoming obvious that the railway cannot deliver a reliable service. See the lead letter in *Your Views* on page 8 to see the appalling effect on just one line.

To deliver a reliable service there need to be sufficient staff, and the days they work need to be in line with the resourcing needed on each of the seven days of the week. Part of the solution is having enough staff and part is about finding a mutually beneficial way (for staff and the industry) to resource each day's train service.

We must progress to a 24/7 railway

The arrival of Great British Railways is a great opportunity for a fundamental reset. It is a chance to create an employment offer to open up opportunities to a wider section of our community and facilitate them working as much as they wish to or are able to at all stages in life – from entering the workforce, through parenthood, caring and into approaching retirement. Many of us want more flexible ways of working.

But flexible can too often mean the employee being asked to be more flexible, while flexibility is not embraced by the employer.

If there is to be a genuine reset of employee-employer relations to achieve railway workforce 2.0, there must be genuine willingness to be flexible on both sides.

It is implausible that this can happen under the intense glare of a single round of annual pay negotiations with individual unions or roles, since it requires longer, more open and exploratory conversations with everyone.

Given the large and fast approaching peak in current railway retirement, those conversations about future terms need to include potential future railway workers, so everyone can understand what

both attracts and repels the next generation from becoming part of the railway.

In order to remain financially viable there has to be acknowledgement that for some key operational roles such as driving, training is very expensive and, to be able to offer the flexibility of shorter or more family friendly working weeks immediately after training, overall remuneration might need to be a bit lower than for someone working full time.

As mentioned, for some railway roles, these high costs are a contributing factor keeping us locked into offering overtime to fewer staff, instead of having a larger number of staff working safer, more sociable hours.

In this context productivity improvements can deliver both a better work life balance for staff (by requiring staff to work less overtime) and a better service for us, the customers.

All of this can deliver a workforce that is available to work at the times and days needed by today's seven day a week railway, when weekend demand is a key source of revenue and the industry is not reliant on rest day working from staff.

The governments in Westminster, Cardiff and Edinburgh need to ask the unions and the employers to start the analysis and do the research.

They need to establish what current and future staff want and do not want and then to move on to design a railway workforce 2.0.

■ Neil Middleton is Railfuture vice-chair



From left: Hannah Richmond from Drax Power Station, Stacey Dickens from Skipton Building Society, Mark Gibbons from Drax, SELRAP campaigners Chris Oakley and Jane Wood, mayor David Skaith (York and North Yorkshire), deputy mayor Peter Kelbane, Graham North from the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority and SELRAP chair Peter Bryson

Skipton-Colne campaigners present case to mayor

By Jane Wood

Skipton-Colne rail reopening campaigners met the new mayor of York and North Yorkshire to show the benefits of a well-connected rail corridor across Northern England.

After the meeting in November, the Skipton East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership said Mayor

David Skaith agreed that the line would close a network gap where there is currently no easy or quick way to travel by rail across the Pennines.

He agreed it would make Skipton a more accessible gateway to and from North Yorkshire.

The route is particularly beneficial to Drax power station by providing more

capacity, a flatter route – good for decarbonisation – and a faster and more efficient supply chain to the power station.

For Skipton Building Society the reopening links areas of deprivation, with access to the many job opportunities the building society provides.

But it was acknowledged that while there is

support for the campaign's aspirations, the £300 million scheme is beyond the resources of any one council or combined authority.

SELRAP has pledged to work with Transport for the North and the Department for Transport on how the case for Skipton-Colne reopening can be taken forward.

Students call for Edinburgh's South Sub to reopen

By Craig Philip

Civil engineering students from Heriot-Watt University are spearheading calls to reopen a rail route that last served neighbourhoods in the south of Edinburgh over 60 years ago.

The six-strong team, based in Edinburgh, is behind an online petition urging policymakers to integrate Edinburgh's South Suburban line into the city's existing tram network, paving the way for a new transport corridor in the Scottish capital. In addition to the petition, which gathered almost 1,500 signatures in a week, the students carried out a public survey revealing significant support for their proposals from local communities and potential passengers.

Opened in 1884, the line – commonly known as the Sub – closed to timetabled passenger services in 1962.

The 12.3km line links Murrayfield stadium in the west of the city with Portobello on its eastern boundary, passing through the key neighbourhoods of Craiglockhart, Morningside, Newington, Cameron Toll, Craigmillar, Fort Kinnaird and Brunstane. It currently has six platforms lining the route which the students

acknowledge require renovation. They propose a further four new platforms at Portobello, Fort Kinnaird, Niddrie Bingham and Cameron Toll.

While the line is maintained by Network Rail and used for freight, the students argue it is an underutilised asset, capable of assisting Edinburgh City Council in meeting its target to reduce car miles travelled by 30% by 2030.

Caitlin Cummings, who is working on the project as part of her final year coursework in civil engineering, said: "Breathing new life into Edinburgh's South Suburban Railway will make travel easier for all and encourage people to leave their cars at home in favour of this transport link.

"We do have a second phase to this project that would see a separate line extend from Portobello to Leith using a disused railway line. This would also reduce public disruption by preventing roads from being dug up for new tram lines and minimise impact to business and the environment while helping encourage people on to public transport."

Efforts to reopen the Sub have been discussed before but dismissed due to high costs related to

increasing capacity at the stations. But with Edinburgh's population increasing and placing greater demands on existing public transport services, the students believe they have found a practical and cost-effective solution.

After months of research using the knowledge gained through their studies, they have tabled a proposal to introduce Scotland's first battery-electric tram-train network. Tram-trains have been in use in Europe for decades, already operate in Sheffield, and can operate on streets and on main line tracks.

The campaign group hopes to trigger interest from the Scottish Government, Edinburgh City Council and Network Rail.

Final-year civil engineering student Corey Boyle said: "The system we propose is called discontinuous electrification. That's an alternative to a full route electrification like we see used on the Edinburgh trams. We want a new feasibility study which looks into reopening the South Sub. The last study was in 2008, which was before the first Edinburgh tram line opened, and it did not look into tram-trains."

INSIDER'S BLUNT ANALYSIS OF WHAT RAIL CAN DO

BOOK REVIEW BY RICHARD LYSONS

Changing Times Changing Trains
 Memoirs and insights on running railways
 By Richard Brown
 New Generation Publishing
 ISBN 978-1-8363-362-5 2024
 339 pages £14.99

A review copy of this book arrived just before Twelfth Night and proved to be a perfect antidote to the winter weather and inevitable train disruption.

Richard Brown has worked in the rail industry for over four decades and this book is both a memoir and a polemic.

Brown's CV is briefly summarised in the book's introduction. He worked for "at least six fundamentally different organisational structures": these were British Rail, National Express group plc, Eurostar and as a non-executive director on the boards of the Department for Transport, High Speed Two and Network Rail.

As you can appreciate, Brown is well qualified to produce over 300 pages on our railways, writing, to use his own words, "out of frustration and concern for the future of our railways in Britain".

The first part of the book covers Brown's early years in British Rail, his time at InterCity and subsequent work at train operators Midland Main Line and National Express. A great deal of this part of rail industry history was new to me and I must credit Brown with his skill at keeping this section understandable and interesting.

Part 2 has chapters on Eurostar, including the discussion of green



Richard Brown at the launch of his book Picture by David Horne

issues in that organisation. He is admirably honest and modest on the challenges of "going green and meaning it". If only more high ranking figures would do this! This is followed by chapters on the move from Waterloo to St Pancras and the Christmas "meltdown" of 2009.

Again, Brown's account is terse and fascinating. For me – a fairly recent rail campaigner – the book's final section is the most interesting and relevant. Whether you are an industry insider or lay campaigner, the chapter dealing with how to organise a railway, and Brown's thoughts on franchising, teamwork and leadership, are illuminating. The chapter on teamwork and leadership impressed me, as did Brown's account of his experiences of working in different teams and the effect on his own happiness. His comments on being "visible as a leader" should be read by all those in rail management.

The book's Conclusion chapter is the highlight of the book for me. Brown is admirably blunt in what he believes are "some of the components in a better railway for Britain".

He stresses the need to respond to customers' expectations and attract more users, whether passengers or freight. Brown then tackles the role of Whitehall in the rail industry and the potential for Great British Railways.

The book lacks both photographs and an index, but I hope that this will not deter potential readers.

I believe it should be read widely within not only Westminster and the DfT, but also the train operating companies and transport authorities.

All would benefit from reading Richard Brown's useful insight into the rail industry. Most *Railwatch* readers would also enjoy it.

■ Richard Lyons is chair of Friends of Littleborough Stations and co-organiser of the Electric Railway Charter



Getting Newburgh back on track

Newburgh Train Station Group

The Newburgh campaign awaits the Scottish Government's response to its case to reopen the station at Newburgh as a short-form, single modular platform, easy to install at low cost compared to a standardised rail build.

NTSG together with SEStran and Fife Council, submitted a final option appraisal (STAG) with supporting materials and a super-executive summary requested by Transport Scotland.

Newburgh station will be a boon for residents and make Newburgh a destination once again.

Station provision will allow Newburgh to flourish and open up north Fife's incipient tourism sector as more visitors come by rail.

The station closed in 1955 and Newburgh relies solely on hourly buses for public transport.

Sustainable travel and easy public transport connectivity to and from Newburgh would be radically improved by the return of a station.

www.newburghtrain.com



Appalling 'service'

The North West report in *Railwatch* 172 resonates with us as Station Adopters at Bare Lane on the Morecambe branch.

We are also having issues with non-rail users parking in the station park and ride facility. This is particularly bad at weekends and Northern is currently considering the most suitable options for the station.

This issue is made worse by people using the car park overnight to consume takeaways. Other problems include maintaining access to the Amazon blue box, the need for Network Rail to get through to its yard beyond the car park and the private occupants of the former station house requiring access for themselves, visitors and emergency services.

Possible solutions being considered include an overnight barrier, charging, improving overnight lighting to deter unwanted visitors, and making more effective use of the installed CCTV cameras.

We can also confirm that usage of the station has declined as a result of service unreliability and cancellations, not to mention the frequent alternative bus service and its lower fares.

Many people have already contacted the local MP over the past few years and they in turn have been in touch with Northern management, but without a great deal of success. The usual reasons given are the unavailability of train crews, particularly conductors at present, and high rates of sickness at certain depots that provide crews for branch services. This could be resolved in part if more local crews were employed, as used to be the case some years ago.

The vexed issue of Sunday/rest day working has yet to be satisfactorily resolved. According to the booked service timetable, there should be 334 services run each week: 52 daily Mon-Fri, 50 Sat and 24 Sun.

The Station Adopters have been keeping tabs on cancellations for some months now and as an illustration, readers might be interested to see the weekly cancellation figures for November and December to date.

The branch shuttle from and to Lancaster is particularly badly affected and has not run at all on Sundays for some time. On Sundays, the branch relies on the four trains running from and returning to Leeds for its "service".

Some cancellations are substituted with a rail replacement bus service, but by no means all of them.

Week ending 22 November: **76 cancellations (22.75% of services)**

Week ending 9 November: **26 cancellations (7.78% of services)**



Ian Brown, left, Stephen Murphitt, right, of SBEL Trust with LSL engineer Robert Fenner at Crewe

Railfuture policy director Ian Brown is chair of the SBEL Trust which has restored the Brighton Belle unit pictured above.

Restoration was carried out at Locomotive Services Ltd in Crewe, with the addition of modern safety features, an accessible toilet and two refitted modern kitchens. The restored train has been tested on the



1961 painting by M A Turner of the Belle at Brighton station and (right) photo of a 2025 test run at Crewe

Week ending 16 November: **72 cancellations (21.30% of services)**

Week ending 23: November: **80 cancellations (23.95% of services)**

Week ending 30 November: **46 cancellations (13.77% of services)**

Week ending 7 December: **58 cancellations (17.36% of services)**

It is worth pointing out that Northern is already being run by the government as a provider of last resort and is therefore in effect nationalised.

It would be interesting to hear what Railfuture members feel might help resolve the current situation, which is slowly running this North West line (and many other lines too) into the ground. What about reducing the timetable to one that has guaranteed train crews to ensure that it is fully reliable and then building it back up as more crews

Crewe-Chester line hauled by two Railfreight class 20 locomotives, and will also do test runs on the electrified network.

After commissioning, the Belle will return to Crewe to have central door locking fitted throughout the train. It is hoped the Brighton Belle will run specials on the electrified lines of the former Southern Region.



are taken on? Passengers need reliability of service above all else.

David Alexander
Station Adopters at Bare Lane
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Sneaky fare rise

I wonder how many people are aware that the discount on fares paid for with a senior railcard was reduced from 34% to 33.4% in September 2024?

The reason I ask is that I knew nothing of this change before it happened, and have seen and heard nothing about it in the media since. I only found out about the alteration when I bought a return walk-on ticket at a booking office, such as I normally buy on a weekly basis. I queried the small rise with the ticket clerk. An increase of just 0.6% in a fare will cause hardship

only to the poorest pensioners but this is an example of a fare increase by stealth, and I think that such sneakiness is unacceptable. How many other stealth increases are being made?

Many of the tickets bought today are advance purchase tickets. The cost of such tickets seems to vary from day to day, digital algorithms appearing to operate a dynamic pricing system rather like booking for an Oasis concert. The result is that purchasers of such tickets will be unaware of the change, particularly if they book online.

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False dawn for EMR?

As a regular user of East Midlands Railway, I find it hilarious that EMR is still promoting the introduction in

2025 of its class 800 Aurora (*Railwatch* 181). This is the third year that EMR have trumpeted the arrival "next year" of the Auroras.

If one does actually turn up in 2025 it will be a mere eight years since GWR introduced its 800s, seven years since LNER and several years since TPE and even Northern introduced theirs. Why has it taken so long? Why, only now apparently, are comfortable seats being designed? Unless the Auroras are going to operate as 10 car units (unlikely, I suspect) then once they are introduced they will immediately suffer the appalling overcrowding that the past-their-sell-by-date noisy class 222 Meridians regularly suffer when in five-car formation. My daily commute home from Leicester to Nottingham usually sees me jammed in the vestibule with 10 other people.

The EMR fleet is atrocious, dirty, noisy, cramped and unreliable. The Norwich-Liverpool route is almost permanently overcrowded. Last week I stood from Nottingham to Manchester. Not fun at all.

Talk of the Auroras appears designed to deflect from the laughing stock that EMR has become. If the Auroras will have comfortable seats, will passengers be able to get to one?

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Home truths

Contrary to views expressed in *Railwatch*, it is not electric cars that are responsible for potholes in roads as they do not weigh much more than petrol or diesel cars. Much more likely is poor maintenance and large lorries. The problem with electric cars is that they fail to tackle congestion on the roads.

Another point: Deputy prime minister Angela Rayner goes on about the number of houses that need to be built, but no mention of new railway lines to serve them and cut down on the congestion on the roads.

Also, more people would be likely to travel by train if the fares were not exorbitant. The other day it cost me £10.10 for a day return between Witham and Chelmsford, a distance of about nine miles. It would have cost me nothing by bus as I have a bus pass, but would have taken 40 minutes as opposed to 10 minutes by train.

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Editor's note: Sustainability by Numbers says that, on average, electric cars weigh between 300kg and 400kg more than petrol cars. The average electric car is heavier than its petrol equivalent but is



STORM (Support the Oldham, Rochdale & Manchester lines) is the rail user group for the Manchester Victoria-Littleborough Calder Valley line. To boost the group and widen membership, STORM commissioned Littleborough-based artist and activist Geoff Read to design a new membership leaflet which features photographs of stations on the line. Copies have been given out at stations and are available in local libraries and visitor attractions. Already the group has had several new membership applications. STORM secretary Richard Lysons said: "STORM has been campaigning for better local rail services and station facilities for over 35 years." Geoff Read's website: www.geoffread.com/design-illustration/

lighter than a sports utility vehicle (SUV) which are also called "Chelsea tractors".

The Principality

Those of us who wish to see better rail services are often accused of harking back to the days of British Rail. Conversely, those of the opposite persuasion are frequently liable to forget anything that

happened before 1997. While a through train between Cardiff and Edinburgh is welcome, please do not fall for the marketing hype that this is some amazing new innovation. It is certainly not "the

Railwatch welcomes articles/pictures from rail users and user groups. Send material (as early as possible) to: The Editor, 4 Christchurch Square, London E9 7HU Email: editor@railwatch.org.uk

first ever direct train service from Cardiff to Edinburgh" (*Railwatch* 182), as there was one back in the 1980s at least.

According to the summer 1986 British Rail Passenger Timetable, Tables 51/65, there was a Mon-Sat train from Cardiff Central at 0735, splitting at Carstairs for Edinburgh (arr 1453) and Glasgow Central (arr 1455). According to the notes, it even had that rare thing these days, a title: "The Principality".

Incidentally, the current overall journey time is very similar to the previous version, albeit running just over a couple of hours later in the day (Cardiff dep 0945, Edinburgh arr 1708), even though the routing is via Sheffield and the East Coast main line.

What would be innovative, of course, would be the new service being an electric train throughout, instead of a diesel Voyager. Sadly, that is unlikely to be the case any time soon.

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Directly wrong

I read in *Railwatch* 182 that the Cardiff-Edinburgh direct train is the first ever direct train service from Cardiff to Edinburgh. That is not true. There was a previous direct Cardiff-Edinburgh service that I caught in September 2003.

Paul Lloyd
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Editor's note: I plead guilty to accepting what was said in a press release when I added a late item to Julian Langston's Wales report.

Backing for Barton

My experiences of the Barton line are much more positive than those of Christian Wolmar (*Railwatch* 182), with the worst happening to me being a train that was 15 minutes late. It is wrong to say that the "frequently cancelled" service serves little purpose for the 1,000 residents of the town. Not everyone wants to go to Hull or on to London, with many simply wishing to travel directly to Grimsby or Cleethorpes, just as dad and I like travelling to Barton, an attractive small Lincolnshire town with its proximity to the Humber Bridge. Driving nine miles to Barnetby certainly is not an option if like me you do not drive.

There is an active Friends of the Barton line group, who know that it is not just the "hardest train enthusiasts" who uses the trains.

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Next time lucky, we hope

In advance of engineering works affecting train services through Westbury, Railfuture Wessex chair Mike Southgate asked Great Western Railway to consider allowing travellers between Cardiff/Bristol and Southampton/Portsmouth to go via Reading and Basingstoke at no extra cost, especially in view of the difficulty in securing sufficient rail replacement buses. This would entail altering tickets bought online or at stations to say "via any reasonable route" rather than the usual "via Salisbury".

GWR's service delivery team agreed it was a sensible suggestion and got on to it straight away. Alas they were not able to make the necessary changes to the ticketing system before the Westbury blockade ended, but they promised to "try and ensure we have a solution in place for future instances".

Railfuture backs open access venture

Just as Railfuture was puzzling over why open access operators seldom show any interest in venturing south of the Thames, along comes an application from Alliance Rail (Southern) to run a new service from Southampton to London. A similar bid around eight years ago failed only when the suggested rolling stock became unavailable. This time the operator wants to run trains from Marchwood on the freight branch west of Southampton, known as the Waterside line.

The reintroduction of a passenger service on the Waterside line is near the top of Railfuture's list of desirable rail reopenings. The project was at an advanced stage of development under the previous government's *Restoring Your Railway* scheme, but has now stalled following the scrapping of the programme.

The Alliance bid addresses another local concern: the need for a third direct train each hour from Southampton to Waterloo after the service was reduced during the pandemic. Railfuture has written to the manager of Alliance offering support and we will be following this latest application closely.

Demand for station may be a stop too many

In the years before Hedge End station was built in 1990 there was only one intermediate station on the line between Fareham and Eastleigh, namely Botley. More recently, when a new settlement was under consideration at Welborne (north of Fareham), Railfuture began a campaign for a station to serve the 6,000-home development. We succeeded in getting a site for the station safeguarded and the fight goes on to get the station built.

Now there are calls for another station to be built at the other end of the route as Eastleigh Borough Council wrestles with possible sites for major housing developments. Part of the route is single track and its only service currently is the hourly train between London and Portsmouth. Hopefully, additional stations and demand may lead to the reinstatement of two trains per hour. The first step is to identify the site for another new station and the resources needed to provide an attractive service. Railfuture will be working with others to ensure the best outcome, which in this case may simply be a feeder bus service, cycle routes and footpaths linking the site to an existing station.

www.railfuture.org.uk/Wessex+branch
Railfuture Facebook



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AGM invitation

Railfuture's Cymru/Wales AGM takes place on Saturday 12 April in the Transport for Wales offices at Shrewsbury Station, starting at 1400. All Railfuture members are welcome from both Wales and surrounding areas, as are members of affiliated rail user groups. Any member in Wales who is interested in joining the committee is especially welcome. Please email me if you are interested. We hope to have a guest speaker. Details will be at railfuturewales.org.uk

Slow response to storm disruption

Railfuture is concerned about TfW's response to extreme weather conditions. Storm Darragh caused major disruption on the railway in December. However, vestiges of normality did not return to the North Wales coast line until Tuesday 10 December, three days after the storm, although there was a brief resumption of service on Monday morning. The Heart of Wales line was closed for almost a week, because of the large number of fallen trees.

There was little information about what was happening several days after the storm, and we have written to TfW requesting better information to be provided. Railfuture has asked TfW to prioritise reopening the railway as soon as possible.

Railfuture persuades MPs to back rail

Following Railfuture's initiative to write to all new MPs in Wales last summer and the resulting meeting with Becky Gittins (*Railwatch* 182), two further meetings have taken place. In both, Railfuture highlighted the importance of integration between trains and buses, especially in rural areas.

We explained Railfuture's purpose and aspirations in Wales to David Chadwick, Liberal Democrat MP for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe. These include a minimum frequency of one train every two hours on all lines and a



simplified fare structure. Mr Chadwick was very interested in the Heart of Wales line, the only line serving his constituency. It has certainly suffered from unreliability and the recent service cut

from five to four through trains each day. Mr Chadwick seemed sympathetic to Railfuture's views. In January, two Railfuture members spoke to Ann Davies, Plaid Cymru MP for Caerfyrddin (Carmarthen), and the party's researcher Hefin Rees-Edwards. The industrial relations and rest day working issues of Northern, Avanti West Coast and GWR causing train cancellations in Wales was on the agenda, as well as TfW's inability to provide a reliable service, even though it has no industrial relations issues. Other subjects covered were rail upgrades, electrification of the main lines in Wales and investment. As TfW provides rail services in the Borders, investment from Westminster would benefit



Julian Langston

rail users in England as well as Wales.

A further meeting with Peredur Griffiths, the Plaid Cymru Member of the Senedd for the South Wales East region, is planned.

Online meetings aid rail campaigners

Online meetings took place for Railfuture Wales members in June and November. Members chatted about issues affecting Welsh rail and got to know the branch committee. Topics raised in November included improving train frequency on Sundays, which should not be too difficult. TfW Rail has agreed with trade unions to incorporate Sunday into the regular working week. Railfuture members are keen to see progress on moving the Welsh rail network towards decarbonisation. The recent introduction of class 197 trains on most long-distance routes was thought to be a problem because converting them to battery or electric power would be very difficult. The issue of poor connections at Newport into London and Bristol services from the Hereford-Abergavenny Marches line was also raised.

Good news on Cardiff Crossrail work

Railfuture welcomes the announcement of a contract to design and build phase 1A of Cardiff Crossrail (*Railwatch* 182). Civil engineering group Graham has won the award to design and build the £100 million tram-train line between Cardiff Central station and Cardiff Bay.

Detailed design work is expected to be complete by autumn, with construction starting shortly afterwards. It is hoped the line will be open by the end of 2028.

It shows TfW and Cardiff Council are serious about building Cardiff Crossrail.

Hope for Cardiff West junction upgrade

The Department for Transport, the office of Ken Skates (cabinet secretary for transport and North Wales in the Welsh government) and the leader of Cardiff Council responded to Railfuture after we called for Cardiff West junction to be upgraded. We had appealed to key people, including the then transport secretary Louise Haigh, to support Cardiff University Professor Mark Barry's call to increase capacity by upgrading the junction when it has to be renewed in a few years' time (*Railwatch* 182).

All responses recognise the need for an intervention and acknowledge that it will be cheaper and easier to do at the same time as the renewal. Railfuture is cautiously optimistic that it might happen.

MS backs Cambrian line demands

Mabon ap Gwynfor, the Plaid Cymru MS for Dwyfor Meirionnydd, contacted *Railwatch* to say he has raised the issue of rail service cuts in the Senedd, and asked for a commitment from the Welsh government to reinstate a proper, regular service on the Cambrian line to Pwllheli. He said there had been 10 years of disruption to the line before the cuts were implemented. He said: "We need to see a line that answers the needs of the residents."

Editor's apology for Peter's lost lines

Railwatch editor Ray King has apologised that the *Railwatch* 182 article "Metro may help Wales recover from Covid" by Peter Kingsbury lost its last two lines. The last sentence should have read: "Commuting is unlikely to return to pre-Covid levels, but will the vastly improved service result in more use for leisure? Let us hope so."

www.railfuturewales.org.uk
X @RailfutureWales

Railway 200 can be an inspiration for Railfuture

By Neil Middleton

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Railway 200 is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make history and be part of something special. How might Railfuture get involved?

Look at the events listing on the Railway 200 website and it is easy to think it is just about celebrating the past, and how rail became a key enabler of the country we all live in now.

But skip past that and my eyes notice these two key phrases: "Inspire a new generation of young pioneering talent to choose a career in rail" and "The spirit of invention and innovation of rail's

early pioneers lives on". It seems to me that these are the aspects that should interest Railfuture. We can twist the first phrase into "and inspire a new generation of young pioneering talent to become rail campaigners" and use the second as a reason particularly to focus on "invention and innovation" during 2025, not just calling for the same, but done better and more reliably and the same repeats of the standard developments on our railway, such as more access for all, or opening another station.

What is real innovation? To be clear, I am not saying let us stop calling for more of the same. Perhaps this year everyone will be a bit more receptive to innovation. You may have heard

about the *Inspiration Train*. It will have "different interactive exhibitions exploring the past, present and future of rail" and will travel round the network over the summer. We understand that each stop will have local content and once more is known, there may be opportunities for Railfuture branches to be present, display posters, etc.

We are always interested in recruiting new members and new campaigning ideas so if you have any ideas – and even more importantly, the time to work on developing an idea – please do get in contact: neil.middleton@railfuture.org.uk

www.railway200.co.uk

Locomotives line up for the Greatest Gathering at Alstom in Derby



The Greatest Gathering launch in January: (left to right) class 390 Pendolino, LNER class A4 Sir Nigel Gresley, class 50 Defiance, British India Line, class 37 Cassiopeia, class 66 and class 57

As part of the Railway 200 celebrations, Alstom is planning *The Greatest Gathering* at its Derby factory in August.

Six months before the event – in February – Alstom reported that all general public tickets were sold out.

The *Gathering* is planned for Friday-Sunday 1-3 August at the historic Litchurch Lane site, which will open to the public for the first time in

over 50 years. Britain's biggest and oldest remaining train factory will be home to more than 50 rolling stock exhibits.

The Railway 200 celebration marks the opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1825.

Rail enthusiast Pete Waterman and GB Railfreight's John Smith will be among the guests.

The first locomotive to run on the

S&DR – Locomotion No 1 – was built by Newcastle-based Robert Stephenson and Company, the first company in the world created to build railway engines.

Through successive mergers, the company became part of Alstom in 1989.

Derby Litchurch Lane (opened 1876) is one of the world's largest rolling stock factories, and Alstom

says it is the only UK facility that designs, engineers, builds and tests trains for domestic and export markets.

Derby is expected to be the home of Great British Railways.

Emma Roberts, programme manager at Railway 200, said: "It is wonderful that Alstom is marking Railway 200 in Derby, the new home of the railway."



This is the Railway 200 location featured on page 2 of this *Railwatch*. HS2 celebrated the launch of Railway 200 at its newly built viaduct in the Colne Valley. HS2 staff and contractors are pictured here celebrating this national milestone on what is now the longest railway bridge in the UK – almost a kilometre longer than the Forth Bridge in Scotland.

The new viaduct on the outskirts of London near Denham will carry HS2 over the river Colne and the Grand Union Canal. Until the advent of rail, canals were often the most economical mode of transport, supporting the first industrial revolution. HS2 says the new inter-city line will boost the regional economy of the West Midlands by £10 billion.



To help teachers, Great Western has launched its *Run the Railway* game. Aimed at 9-11 year olds, the interactive game empowers pupils to develop skills in science, computing, maths, geography, and design and technology. Management tools allow teachers to assess each pupil's progress across subjects and topics. The game is supported by downloadable resources including lesson plans and certificates. www.younggreatwesterners.com/teacher

Tale of three cities helps us breathe more easily

London, Paris and New York

By Ian Brown



It is 22 years since the mayor of London braved a hostile press and political establishment to introduce a congestion charge for the capital city. The public, however, had backed Ken Livingstone to win the 2000 mayoral election with congestion charging as an important part of his manifesto.

The stated aim was to reduce road traffic congestion and to mitigate the poisonous air in London. It was also aimed at reducing the over £5 billion estimated economic cost of congestion, including unreliable deliveries and delayed buses.

The charge started at £5 a day, increasing to £8 from July 2005, £10 from January 2011, £11.50 from June 2014 and £15 from June 2020. Using the Bank of England's inflation calculator, the charge would have increased from £5 to £9 by December 2024, compared with the current price of £15. This clearly points to a "get it in, price it up later policy" which we will come back to in looking at other developments.

Interestingly, fully electric cars were exempt, despite causing the congestion just like polluting cars. This changed in 2025 and electric cars are now charged.

So what did it achieve and should it be applied elsewhere? A pertinent fact here is that in 2000, only 14% of people in London travelled by car, unlike in other UK cities where car travel is dominant. Modal shift to rail, therefore, was unlikely to swamp the rail network. Just about everywhere in the world it would have been too much new business for rail to accommodate, except in mega cities which have developed transit systems.

The quoted results in London were quite significant:

- Reducing traffic entering the zone by 18% during charge operational hours (which have varied over the 20 years)
- Reduced congestion by 30%
- Boosted bus travel by 30%
- Enabled 10% journey switch to walking, cycling and public transport

Is this the answer on its own?

All this was successful as a one-off hit at reducing congestion, but it was soon realised that the scheme was seriously flaky in addressing pollution. This led to a separate charge solely aimed at curbing pollution. The Ultra Low Emissions Zone was introduced by London

Mayor Sadiq Khan in April 2019. The price is £12.50, payable over a wider area of London. This is on top of the congestion charge in the central congestion charge zone.

We are now in serious territory: congestion has a negative economic effect, but pollution kills. In 2019, 3,600 to 4,100 deaths were estimated to be attributable in Greater London to fine particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide. This just exceeds the number of people killed or injured on the roads in Greater London at around 3,700.

Each car in London costs the NHS and society £8,000 due to air pollution (source: report for the Independent).

Income from the ULEZ charge should decline to zero eventually. Just quoting nitrogen dioxide, ULEZ has reduced the number of vehicles that do not meet emissions standards.

Each day 74,000 fewer polluting vehicles enter the zone, reducing pollution by 60% since ULEZ expansion in October 2021. Unlike the congestion charge, ULEZ can be applied to most cities without the fear of swamping public transport.

Targeting polluting cars is a social problem as many of the people who drive them cannot afford more modern vehicles. A scrappage scheme was introduced to mitigate this issue and was key to the success of the scheme.

It is clear therefore that pollution can be tackled but congestion cannot without investment in higher capacity, reliable, affordable public transport.

Traffic reduction methods only work economically for a city if accompanied by increased capacity public transport, such as in London by the Crossrail rail project which



Greater London residents are enjoying cleaner air thanks to both the congestion charge zone and the ultra low emission zone Map: TFL



Besancon: Light rail helps a smaller city provide an attractive and sustainable transport system and environment. The French approach would help British cities become attractive again. Across France, there are 28 operational tram networks, compared to seven in the UK. Quite a contrast Picture: Urban Rail net

provided a 10% increase in the capital's rail capacity. The two go together. Congestion charge revenues reached £307 million in 2021/2 and ULEZ/LEZ a further £144 million.

From a Raifuture campaigning point of view, we must recognise that a high congestion charge is not viable in isolation.

However, a high ULEZ charge certainly is. A congestion charge as a way of raising funds is another matter. It should be seen as a key to

modal shift to rail by providing the funds to invest.

Worst UK cities

According to *Time Out* magazine, the worst 10 cities in the UK in order of hours lost are:

- London
- Bath
- Bristol
- Manchester
- Leeds
- Birmingham
- Sheffield
- Edinburgh
- Cambridge
- Coventry

Manchester is fourth on the list but is now taking admirable steps to improve its environmental and economic position. All cities need a comprehensive integrated rail and light rail to achieve modal shift with funding from some sort of road pricing. The Bee network for rail is coming to Manchester, but funding



Manchester: See page 16 for details of Manchester's plans to create a regional rail network

remains an issue because the city does not have a road pricing scheme.

Paris

Paris has an extensive suburban rail network with regional express trains (RER), as well as metro and tram systems which have been expanded with huge capital projects. Like London with Crossrail, Paris has the public transport capacity to achieve modal shift to rail. There is a serious difference in philosophy between France and the



The Paris equivalent of London's Crossrail (Elizabeth Line) is the RER (Regional Express network). London has one line while Paris has six. Both cities have extensive Metro/Underground systems but Paris has far more trams RATP

UK concerning funding public transport. The British model is to charge the highest possible fares to create investment funds. The French model for Paris is to deem that the transport network for the city is essential and should be funded by the general population, not just by the users. Fares must be affordable so the fares/cost recovery rate is much lower at 30%. Paris has a funding tool called "Versement Transport" or VT. This gives local government the powers to create local payroll tax for firms with over 11 employees. It is a system that has been in place since 1973, varying between 1.4% and 2.6% of gross wages depending on place of residence. This goes directly to funding public transport in Paris and it shows with the massive capital investment in its transport system.

This approach has certainly been successful in creating the capacity for modal shift to public transport, but it relies on lower fares to get people to use it. Paris has been reluctant to implement traffic restriction methods in parallel. The authorities have done all the usual things: bus and bike lanes, parking restrictions and even gimmicks like banning certain vehicles on certain days and replacing a road along the Seine with a promenade.

This suddenly changed from November with a declaration from mayor Anne Hidalgo. Parking charges rose by 300% for oversize "Chelsea Tractors" and other polluting vehicles. Ms Hidalgo also introduced a limited traffic zone (ZTL) in the centre of Paris. Residents and certain businesses will be able to gain access to the zone but driving through will be prohibited.

Half the public space in Paris was taken up by cars yet journeys into the zone were 54% on public transport, 34% on foot, 7% cycle and only 2% by car.

So eventually London and Paris have adopted different ways to reduce congestion and pollution. Paris went for differential parking charges to limit pollution and a no go zone in preference to a congestion charge.

British drivers have had to learn how to buy and display a windscreen vignette if they want to drive in most French cities, including Paris.

Across France, there are 28 operational tram networks, compared to seven in the UK. Quite a contrast. The smallest town in France with a modern light rail network is Besancon which has a population of around 120,000. Leeds has a population of 536,280 (or 812,000 in the larger Leeds



New York's Congestion Relief Zone applies to Manhattan south of 60th Street Map: MTA New York

district). Leeds is the largest city in Europe without a rail-based transport system.

New York - Manhattan

Like London and Paris, New York has serious problems with congestion and pollution, and curbing the use of the car is a highly political issue.

New York's city traffic engineer Sam Schwartz was known as Gridlock Sam after trying and failing to introduce congestion pricing in the 1970s. Fifty years later, on 5 January 2025, the Democrat-run city finally implemented the charge, the first city in the United States to do so. It is hoped the £7 congestion charge at peak times will raise £12 billion for upgrades to its beleaguered transit system.

The planners wanted to impose a high charge similar to London's current charge but politics intervened. Instead, the scheme follows the London pattern of starting low. It is planned to increase over the years on the "get it in, price it up" principle.

The US already has its own EZ Pass system where tolls are collected on some roads by number plate scanning technology. So New York's congestion charge did not require a bespoke system as London did.

Raifuture's view

From a Raifuture perspective, a low charge, albeit for the wrong reasons, is actually clever. It means New York's creaking transport system can be upgraded with the steady flow of investment from the congestion charge.

It should allow the system to make itself gradually more ready for the hoped-for modal shift of car drivers to public transport.

There will be benefits for motorists who can afford to pay. Less traffic will mean between 10% to 30% speedier trips for drivers. However, the whole system is at risk of being scrapped by President Donald Trump. He has threatened to abolish the New York scheme. Of interest to us in Raifuture of course

is whether this will achieve modal shift. Initial statistics show that bus ridership on routes into Manhattan is up by 7% on weekdays and 21% at weekends when there is more spare capacity.

It was also reported that one million fewer road vehicles entered Manhattan in January. A poll of Manhattan car drivers found that two thirds back the new charging policy.

At the end of January subway ridership was up 7.3% on weekdays and 12% at weekends. The three suburban rail networks into New York (New Jersey Transit, Metro North and the Long Island Railroad) have not as yet reported. All eyes will be on these.

Raifuture diagnosis

Schemes which start low, gain political acceptance, price up over time but ensure that collected charges go to funding transport improvements have it right.

The hard part is starting such a scheme, and making it politically acceptable, but also having the public transport capacity for modal shift from car to train.

Big cities can finesse this where the car has a low share of journeys and the cities have established integrated transport systems.

Small cities, such as all our other UK cities, must have parallel investment in public transport to allow for modal shift. This may explain why we have no other congestion charge schemes in the UK at present. [Durham has a £2 charge for entering the city centre between 1000 and 1600]

Worldwide, however, we can safely deduce that the tide is turning on the realisation that investment in rail schemes is key to the economic, environmental and social inclusion requirements of our growing cities.

We must campaign to spread this to our other cities, most of which are much larger than Besancon.

■ Ian Brown is Raifuture policy director

davidpennierail21@gmail.com

Brian Dunsby OBE Railfuture Yorkshire extends its condolences to Brian Dunsby's family following his sudden death on 4 January at the age of 84. Brian was the chair and guiding light of the Harrogate Line Supporters Group, which he had been instrumental in founding in 2012. At the 2013 Railfuture annual conference, Brian received two awards on behalf of his group: winner of the Award for the Most Effective New Group, and Commended for the Most Effective Campaign.

Brian campaigned hard to achieve improved train services for Harrogate. His biggest achievement was to get six direct weekday LNER services to London. Brian also campaigned for a new parkway station to serve Leeds-Bradford Airport; this has been agreed by West Yorkshire Combined Authority, but not yet actioned. He also campaigned for services on the Knaresborough-York section to have their frequency doubled (achieved in 2021), and for the



David Pennie

whole route to be electrified which is still an ongoing ambition.

Brian's route to campaigning was different from most activists. He was chief executive of the Harrogate Chamber of Commerce, following a successful career in business. A full obituary is at <https://www.yourharrogate.co.uk/local-news/harrogate/tributes-paid-to-one-of-a-kind-brian-dunsby-following-sudden-death/>

East Coast main line timetable The East Coast main line timetable to be introduced in December 2025 will provide six LNER services per hour in each direction. Welcomed by many users of principal stations, it will, however, reduce services for Thirsk and Northallerton because of pathing issues north of York. David Skaith, mayor of the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority, is among those who appealed for changes, but there is no sign of any move to address this issue. In the meantime, we are pleased that Bradford will receive extra London services from May, which is important for its city of culture events this year.

Station improvements Three major stations are benefiting from improvements.

At York a family lounge opened on the concourse just before Christmas. This is a welcome development, as waiting areas on this side of the station are fairly limited. LNER plans to provide similar lounges at the other main stations on the East Coast



Brian Dunsby

main line. York will also see its four lifts replaced this year.

At Leeds there are plans to upgrade platform 17 to take longer trains, important because of increasing demand for the Leeds-Nottingham service, which urgently needs more capacity, especially at weekends. A new footbridge, an extra line north of the current tracks and an enhanced concourse are also planned.

At Sheffield a 'quick win' project to increase capacity is planned, pending the major work which will be needed for Midland main line electrification.

TransPennine conference Work will be stepped up this year on the TransPennine route upgrade, following the switch-on of electrification between Manchester Victoria and Stalybridge. A 30-day blockade of Huddersfield station will start on 30 August and there will be weekend blockades between Leeds and Church Fenton. The majority of stations will be upgraded and nearly all will be made fully accessible.

Railfuture Yorkshire's joint vice-chair Graham Collett attended an online consultation meeting to discuss the access plans for Greenfield and Mossley stations in January. Some stations or station entrances are being relocated, for example at Mirfield. An upgrade at Deighton station will run from August until January 2027 and Ravensthorpe station will be closed until summer 2028. Graham is seeking details of the alternative access arrangements

for these major changes. **TransPennine stakeholders** The stakeholder conferences of train operators are always worth attending, and Railfuture Yorkshire was well represented at the TransPennine Express event in York in January. There are positive developments as TPE moves forward, including the restoration of direct Hull-Liverpool services in the December 2024 timetable. In a presentation on the TransPennine Route Upgrade, it was noted that this service did not feature in a slide showing future TPE services planned for after the completion of TRU. In response to a question on this, TPE managers said that the pattern of train services post-TRU is not yet decided. Railfuture Yorkshire will be watching with interest.

Railfuture Yorkshire meetings Visitors welcome
Saturday 29 March at 1300 Quaker Meeting House, Friargate, York. Guest speaker: deputy mayor of York & North Yorkshire Combined Authority Pete Kilbane on current rail priorities.

Saturday 10 May at 1300 Mill Hill Chapel, City Square, Leeds (near the station). Guest speaker: West Yorkshire Combined Authority's Tim Lawrence on the Leeds Mass Rapid Transit scheme. Also Railfuture Yorkshire's AGM. www.railfuture.org.uk/yorkshire+Branch
Railfuture Yorkshire Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/3116771821782626/

Battle continues for level boarding

By Gareth Dennis
 Campaign for Level Boarding



Gareth Dennis

Level boarding refers to any solution that positions the floor of the train and the surface of the station platform at the same height and closes the horizontal gap when trains stop at curved platforms.

Many of the excuses used to justify the widespread lack of level boarding by the railway industry, politicians and commentators have now been debunked, but back in 2018 that was not the case. At the same time, there was an increasing number of disabled passengers being trapped on trains, abandoned at stations or otherwise being treated appallingly.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson DBE was prominent in pointing out these injustices, and I had been advocating more loudly at the time for level boarding as a solution. We met up in a Pumpkin Café in Darlington station and decided that this was the moment to unify the diverse range of challenges faced by disabled passengers and the potential ability to travel independently that it represented into a new public campaign. The solution to many of them is level boarding.

I had also been speaking to other disabled activists such as Tomas Rey (creator of the Step-Free London

website) and the late, great Alan Benson of Transport for All. In addition, I had contacted David Powell, who was in the process of bringing the UK's first level boarding capable main line railway fleet into service on Merseyrail. Fairly quickly, we met online and began to create a set of key asks, broaden our range of contacts, and start making links across industry to initiate change within industry and at a government level.

Three of the asks were simple:

1 Establish a procurement standard for all new trains to be "low-floor", with extendable gap fillers, to match the platform height

2 Begin a rolling programme of platform improvements to bring all platforms up to the existing UK standard

3 Agree a target of 2040 to achieve level boarding across the UK rail network

We are in a position where we have largely achieved our first ask. In Britain, new trains are delivered in tremendous bouts of feast and famine. As the campaign was founded, we were in the midst of one of the peaks of activity, and only a minority of trains being delivered were "low-floored" to enable level boarding. Today, we are approaching another peak in a few years, and at the moment it looks like only one of the new trains being introduced will not be level boarding ready.

I say "ready" because level boarding



Bad

cannot be achieved without considering the train and the infrastructure as a single system. Trains need to be low-floored to match the GB standard platform position, and platforms need to be corrected to the standard offsets.

Our informal campaign has a wide range of members who hold positions in industry and activist spheres, and we maintain contact virtually. We respond to consultations and industry requests, and we ensure there is representation on advisory panels and other feedback groups. We also provide press information around accessibility stories, and do public outreach where it is useful to do so, not least through the website which provides a regularly visited FAQ page. Brexit and Covid slowed our intent to create an all-party parliamentary group.

Much of our success has come from a couple of extremely knowledgeable and tenacious members who hold train operators to account when they consult on existing and future train fleets.



Better

Another key factor is that we have constantly communicated that level boarding sees benefits well beyond accessibility, even if this is extremely important. The so-called PTI, that is the platform train interface, represents the highest risk on the GB railway, and it is a risk that is getting worse, not better. Level boarding greatly reduces this risk. Another key challenge on the railway is capacity and, by speeding up boarding significantly, level boarding can allow more trains to use the same tracks.

Lastly, the accessibility benefits go well beyond disabled people, with all passengers benefitting from easier travel with level boarding, not least those pushing buggies or pulling luggage. It is a win for everyone, and communicating these universal benefits is essential. Level boarding does not solve all or even most of the accessibility challenges disabled passengers face, but without it independent travel is impossible. There is much more to do!

www.levelboarding.org.uk/

We want an even better railway, say Yorkshire

By Graham Collett

Railfuture Yorkshire has more than 20 affiliated rail user groups, reopening campaigns and station restoration groups. Some of these also cover routes, stations or campaigns in adjacent Railfuture branch areas, for example the Hope Valley RUG, the Skipton and East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership and the Bentham Line.

Most of the groups can claim successes as a result of their lobbying. Here are some examples:

Friends of Asker Railway Station
www.facebook.com/groups/1568948423354427/

Chair Graham Moss describes the campaign for the Asker line to date:

I am pleased to report that the Doncaster to West Yorkshire via Asker (Asker line) scheme strategic outline business case was submitted to the Department for Transport under the Restoring Your Railway fund and classed as a win win scheme with little outlay. The business case demonstrates that the Asker line scheme has a compelling strategic case for investment. What sets the scheme apart is that it not only provides significant benefits for local communities, but also delivers strategic connectivity and resilience right across South and West Yorkshire through the reinstatement of an underused line for regular passenger services. In the context of the climate emergency, the RYR programme offered a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reduce



reliance on car use and shift trips to sustainable modes of transport. Now that the fund has been terminated by the government and responsibility has been handed to the regional mayors to handle local transport in-house, we have to convince South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority that the scheme can deliver the benefits outlined above.

Hope Valley Railway Users Group

<http://hopevalleyrailway.org.uk/>

What we have achieved so far

Chair Chris Morgan reports:

Slowly, little by little, we have prised more out of Northern through its various iterations. It has not been us alone. Users in both Manchester and Sheffield were asking for more through services, preferably fast. Gradually, we inched forward and achieved almost hourly through stopping trains. The Sunday service was improved to match weekdays, but many of the trains did not stop at every station every hour. It was confusing. That continued into 2020 when we received brand new three-coach class 195 trains. We thought we would have to wait until the current major improvement work was complete to get the full

hourly service without skipping a few stops. For once we had a pleasant surprise. Resulting from a shambolic attempt to schedule more trains through Manchester than the tracks and platforms could accommodate, there was a meltdown with massive delays and cancellations. They spread out from Manchester across the nation. A complete redraft of all trains serving Manchester had to be made. Many services were cut back. Sheffield lost its direct services to Manchester Airport. We were lucky enough to gain from all this. Surprise, surprise, with only one or two exceptions we have had a full hourly stopping all-stations service seven days a week since December 2022.

We try to speak to as many parties as we can. I was recently in contact with Laura Etheridge at East Midlands Railways and we may get an extra Sunday train in December as a result of my evidence confirming their hoped-for business case.

Our aspirations: Fewer cancellations, and better timekeeping. More carriages, particularly at weekends. More trains that stop at all stations – two per hour at peak times. Could a fast service stop at one of our stations every hour? How would that impact on Northern's aspirations to offer shorter journey times? How would more stopping services impact on the freight services? Hope Valley residents are not the only users of the railway.

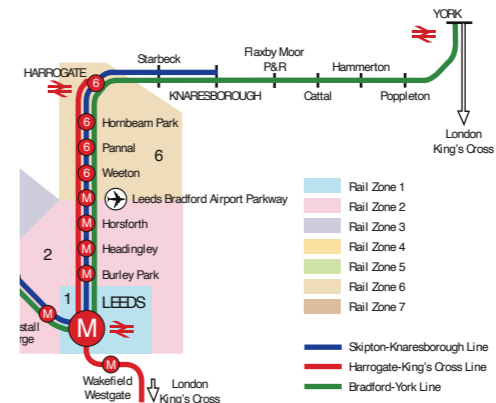
campaigners with a proud record of successes

Harrogate Line Supporters Group
www.harrogateline.org/

Andrew Whitworth reports on the two main achievements so far:

Harrogate to London services every two hours each way! We successfully lobbied, initially GNER, then Virgin and finally LNER to establish a direct service between Harrogate and London King's Cross with six trains each way every day of the week. This replaces the previous need to take a local train to Leeds or York and change there on to the London trains – and the same coming back. Harrogate Line Supporters Group has campaigned actively to get a two-hourly service to the capital.

The late Brian Dunsby successfully led this campaign. He said: "The six new direct services will make an enormous difference to the Harrogate economy. As a town which relies heavily on the visitor economy, both through tourism and the conference trade, strong links to London and the south of England are absolutely vital. On top of that, we have many professional service businesses in Harrogate and they need to be able to get to and from the capital with ease in order to grow and operate successfully. These new trains will make that ambition a reality and we look forward to working closely with Virgin to ensure Harrogate remains a key consideration in their East Coast operations." The new service eventually started in LNER livery in December



The Group's aspirations:
 Electrification of the Harrogate line.

HLSG started to campaign for full electrification of the Harrogate line in 2011 and persuaded all local authorities on the line to fund a detailed feasibility report which was published in 2013. This report demonstrated a strong business case and showed there were no major infrastructure or power supply challenges in electrifying the loop. The electrification was given 'Tier One' priority in 2015's Northern Sparks report. Aside from obvious environmental imperatives, electrification would allow more efficient operation of constrained platforms at Leeds and would be a standalone project which could be started immediately – so we remain hopeful it will be progressed.

Parkway station at Leeds Bradford Airport.

HLSG had proposed a parkway station on our line with a bus link to Leeds Bradford Airport, and in 2016 this was accepted as the best solution to improve airport connectivity (over light rail). This has since been taken forward to full business case by West Yorkshire Combined Authority. More than 60% of passengers are expected to be non-airport users, so this should boost our line significantly and also reduce congestion. Linked with electrification, it would allow through trains from Bradford to the airport via reversal at Leeds. We hope the project will be greenlit in the spring Spending Review.

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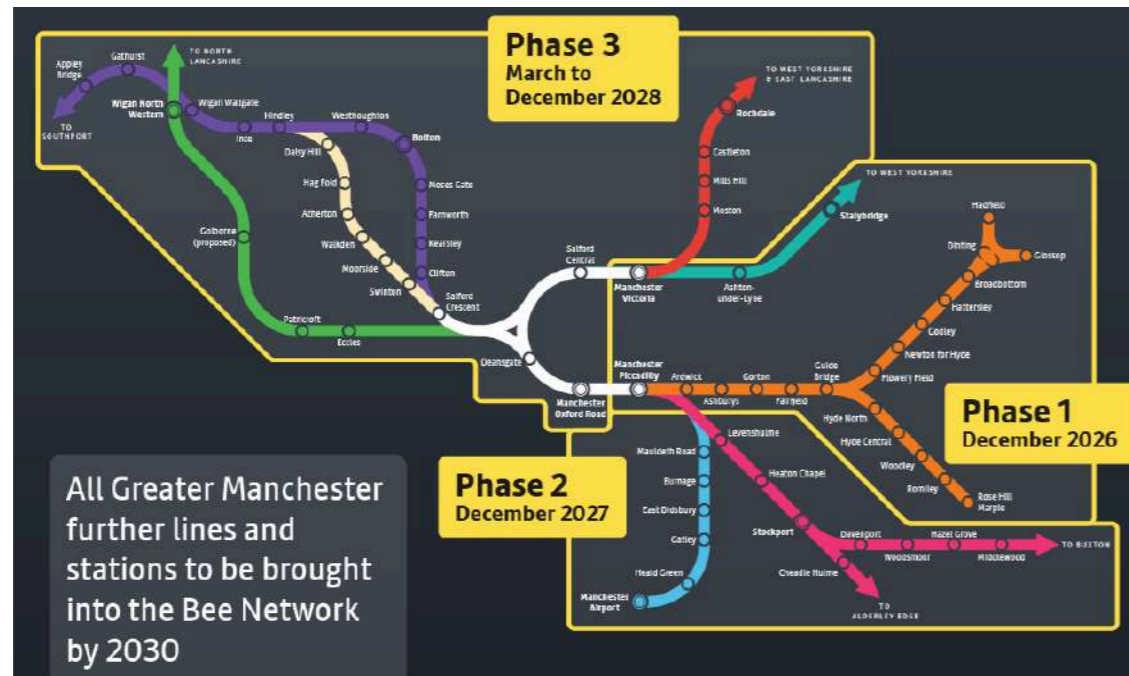
Two-year closure
Manchester Oxford Road station is set to close for two years after Network Rail announced plans to remodel the station, reducing the number of platforms from five to three but lengthening the maximum number of carriages on the through platforms to eight from the present six. The new layout will have a central west-facing turnback bay platform of six carriages to reduce conflicts on arrival and departure of terminating services. At the moment, eastbound local stopping services from Liverpool, Warrington and Southport usually terminate in platform five on the north side of the station, and when trains from here depart again they have to cross both up and down lines, blocking other west side departing/arriving services.

A new footbridge with lifts will be built giving step-free access to all platforms (only platforms 2-5 are currently accessible) and platforms will be wider than at present, with new wider and longer canopies. Signalling work will improve the capacity between Deansgate and Oxford Road, allowing eastbound trains to wait outside the station to get a clear platform, rather than being held at Deansgate. The works at Oxford Road station will mean it will be closed to passengers, although it is planned that trains will be able to go through the station apart from at limited times when track and signals are replaced.

Railfuture responded to Network Rail's consultation with our concerns about "locking in" of existing service patterns with the new layout – no flexibility to offer any alternatives in the future. There is also the issue around the present use of some platforms to terminate and turn round services short of Manchester Piccadilly and beyond during times of disruption. The new layout appears to have no capacity for this without blocking one of the through platforms (assuming normal terminating services occupy the new bay platform).

Friends groups in Stockport
Friends groups in Stockport are joining forces to campaign for improved services. Northern's problems in servicing its current timetables are well known, and both the Friends of Rose Hill Station and Friends of Marple Station have had enough. With Rose Hill being at the end of the Hyde Loop from Manchester, and Marple on the main line between Manchester and Sheffield, both stations will also become part of the local Bee Network between 2026 and 2030.

The groups have already got their Lib Dem Hazel Grove MP Lisa Smart on board. She has expressed her concern at Northern's failings.



Trains join buses and trams to create Bee network

Rail services will expand Manchester's public transport Bee Network in a phased programme starting next year.

Nearly 100 stations will be served by yellow Bee trains by 2030.

Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham said Transport for Greater Manchester will take rail services into public control, following the pattern used to take over the buses which was completed in January.

Simpler fares, eventually integrated with bus and tram tickets in a 'tap-in, tap out' system, and better services are promised.

The first phase, set for December 2026, includes the

lines from Manchester Piccadilly to Hadfield, Glossop and Rose Hill Marple, and Manchester Victoria to Stalybridge.

The second phase, from December 2027, includes the Piccadilly-Airport line, Piccadilly-Cheadle Hulme route, and Piccadilly-Buxton as far as Middlewood.

The final phase is the largest and will see TfGM take over city centre stations, as well as routes from Manchester to Appley Bridge, Wigan North Western, Hindley and Rochdale.

New TfGM maps released with the announcement also show Bee Network trains will serve a new £32 million station in Golborne, after the government approved its outline business case.

The groups are hoping to get Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham to address the significant operational failings and service weaknesses that could prevent effective incorporation of their train services into the Bee Network.

Car park charges at Chinley
Northern has plans for car parking charges at some rural stations. At Chinley, on the Hope Valley line in north-west Derbyshire, Northern agreed to defer the charges until April because the free car park at the community centre was unavailable.

Northern argues that parking charges at stations will help maximise capacity for rail users. Opponents say drivers will be discouraged from using rail for commuting.

The Chinley and Buxworth Transport Group is interested to know the experience of other communities where Northern has introduced car parking charges since May last year.

The stations in the North West affected are Adlington (Cheshire), Bamber Bridge, Burnley Central, Chinley, Colne, Cuddington, Disley,

Layton, Mouldsworth, New Mills Newtown and Padgate.

The group wants to know whether the new policy, with its RingGo payment system and maximum charge of £2 per day, has been accepted without comment. Have drivers shunned the station car park and parked on local roads? Has there been an increase in inconsiderate parking on roads near stations? Is the new system of overnight parking permits for local residents working well? You can contact the group at <https://chinleybuxwortht.co.uk/contact-us/>

Salford Central
Greater Manchester Bee network committee has decided to spend £10 million on Salford Central, which featured in *Railwatch* 172, to modernise it and make it accessible.

Funding from Network Rail will provide for a new ticket office and accessible toilets. The station was closed in February and March and is expected to reopen at the end of April. Work will continue until October. Network Rail is also building a third platform at Salford

Crescent station, aimed at reducing delays and congestion through the busy Castlefield corridor.

New trains
Northern has invited train makers Alstom, CAF, Hitachi, Siemens and Stadler to negotiate on plans to build 450 new trains over the next 10 years.

Northern wants a mix of electric, multimodal (diesel/electric) and some battery-powered trains. Phase one will replace class 150, 155 and 156 trains, and also include 12 electric three-carriage trains to operate the local stopping services between York, Leeds, Huddersfield and Manchester following the electrification of the route through the Transpennine Route Upgrade.

Stockport viaduct restoration
The 1840-built Stockport viaduct, which carries almost 400 trains a day over the M60 motorway and the river Mersey, is being restored at a cost of £1 million. During February and March, engineers abseiled down the viaduct above the motorway to carry out work on the arches.

www.railfuture.org.uk/North+West+Branch

New rail freight depot for London



Works are under way on the north London outskirts to create a 1,000 acre rail freight hub at Radlett, near the capital's M25 orbital motorway.

A new bridge under the Midland main line was built in five days and nights over Christmas when the main line was closed. A short branch line will go under the new bridge into the rail freight depot.

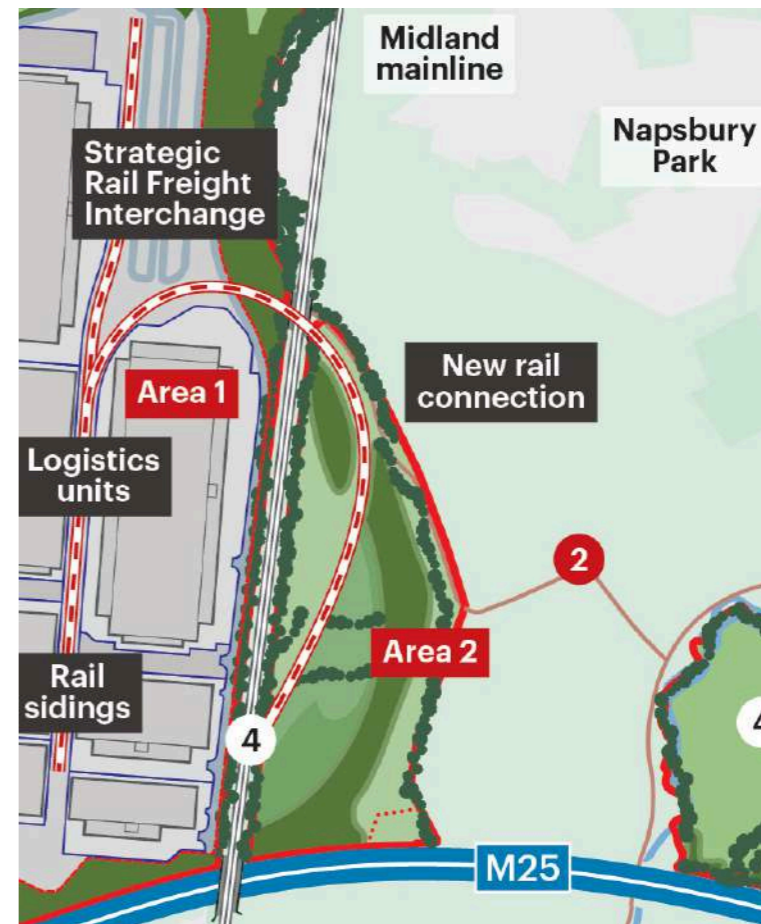
The 6,000 tonne pre-cast concrete bridge, to enable the construction of the strategic rail freight interchange (SRFI), was pushed into place with hydraulic jacks on a temporary track built by VolkerFitzpatrick.

The SEGRO logistics park will be one of 20 SRFIs in the UK and the only one serving the London area. It is designed to shift freight from road to rail as a way to net zero.

At the depot site, there will also be 600 acres of managed woodland, conservation grazing and a public country park with 10 miles of new footpaths and bridleways. Great crested newts on the site are being moved to a new home.

Construction of the depot on the former Handley Page airfield follows opposition to developer SEGRO from protesters, who went as far as a high court appeal against the plan. Their appeal was rejected in October, clearing the way for work on the depot to go ahead.

Golden triangle
Julian Worth, long-time rail freight manager and now chair of the rail freight forum of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport, says: "A significant boost to maritime intermodal is imminent, with the opening of the western section of East West Rail from Oxford to Bletchley. As well as providing a new route from



A freight loop from the Midland main line will connect SEGRO's new depot

Southampton to the North West and Scotland, it will – for the first time – give rail a direct route from the port to the golden triangle of logistics in the south Midlands."

Hinckley hopes
There are hopes that the government will approve the proposed national rail freight interchange at Hinckley, Leicestershire, which developer

Tritax Big Box Developments says is designed to handle up to 16 trains per day on 775 metre long sidings.

Ely upgrade
MPs on the East of England all-party parliamentary group have written to transport secretary Heidi Alexander calling for the vital upgrade at Ely to be given the go-ahead in the government's spending review. The appeal was

supported by England's Economic Heartland chair Liz Leffman and mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Dr Nik Johnson.

The overwhelming case for dealing with the Ely bottleneck includes estimates that it could stimulate 277,000 extra rail passenger journeys per year. However, it has such a high benefit-cost ratio, returning £4.89 of benefits for every £1 invested, because of its importance to rail freight.

New rail freight services would serve freight terminals in the Midlands, the north of England and Scotland, while reducing pressure on London's rail network.

The Ely upgrade will remove the need for 98,000 lorry journeys every year and reduce carbon emissions by 1.7 million tonnes of carbon dioxide over 60 years.

Think greener
The government is being urged to support rail freight in its spending review. Rail Partners' *A Greener Track* report shows the cost of moving goods by rail has risen three times faster than road costs over the last decade, partly because of government policy, such as the freeze on road fuel duty. Every tonne of freight transported by rail freight produces 76% less carbon dioxide than the equivalent transport by road. Rail freight also helps to reduce road congestion, with one train able to remove up to 129 lorry movements.

Coal switch
Freightliner and rolling stock company Porterbrook are in partnership to convert redundant coal wagons into box wagons for aggregate materials. The conversion work is being carried out by W H Davis at Mansfield.

West Midlands: Metro's £295m extension incorporates Dudley's historic Parkhead viaduct

Transport secretary Heidi Alexander went to the West Midlands in February to signal the start of work on a £295 million project to extend the Metro, to improve connections between the Black Country and the centres of Birmingham and Wolverhampton. The seven-mile extension from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill will allow Metro passengers better connections for Dudley, where work has been under way since 2020. The Wednesbury-Dudley section will open in the autumn. The Metro will bring back into use the restored eight-span Parkhead viaduct over the Dudley canal locks.

Ms Alexander said: "The extension of the West Midlands Metro will be transformational. Residents in and around the Black Country have been chronically underserved by public transport, limiting access to

jobs and opportunities and stunting economic growth." Chancellor Rachel Reeves gave government backing for the extension by approving £1.3 billion spending on city transport schemes in her October financial statement. Some rail campaigners have opposed trams taking over the route which includes parts of the former Oxford-Wolverhampton rail line. They say the Stourbridge Junction-Walsall route should remain part of the national rail network for freight and other passenger services. The Walsall-Brierley Hill freight-only section was closed in 1993.

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West Midlands mayor Richard Parker and transport secretary Heidi Alexander at Parkhead viaduct, Dudley, to launch phase two of the Metro line extension Picture: Martyn Smith/Local Democracy Reporting Service

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Transport East

Railfuture East Anglia attended a crucial conference in January, with representatives from local authorities, operators, chambers of commerce and politicians both local and national. Among them was Simon Lightwood, minister responsible for local transport throughout Britain. He emphasised the importance of local integrated transport and active travel. The conference was organised by Transport East, a sub-national transport body, based in Ipswich. TE covers Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, the city of Southend, and Thurrock. Railfuture's mission to campaign for a bigger and better network can be a frustrating business. So it was pleasing to see the results of TE's work in gathering evidence, backing up the work of our affiliate rail user group ONTRACK. It has campaigned tirelessly with Railfuture backing for a half-hourly stopping train service between the main regional centre (Colchester) and Clacton, population 58,000.

Currently, there is just an hourly all-stations service from Colchester to Walton-on-the-Naze with an hourly semi-fast from London Liverpool Street to Clacton. TE employed Arup to show where quick wins for the rail network could be made without large infrastructure projects. ONTRACK argues that doubling the service between Clacton and Colchester to two stopping trains an hour could have enormous economic benefits for the Tendring peninsula. Greater Anglia has welcomed Transport East's findings. Transport East investigations also show that "two trains an hour" across almost the entire network are both feasible and necessary for sound economic reasons. The national importance of the East's economy supports the need for greater investment in infrastructure. Every speaker and panel highlighted the urgency of resolving bottlenecks at Ely and Haughley. These improvements are crucial not just for freight but also for passenger flows, as the railway network begins to shift focus slightly away from London and towards Cambridge and connections with East West Rail.

Rail East – Suffolk's new transport plan

Railfuture has responded to Suffolk County Council's emerging local transport plan.



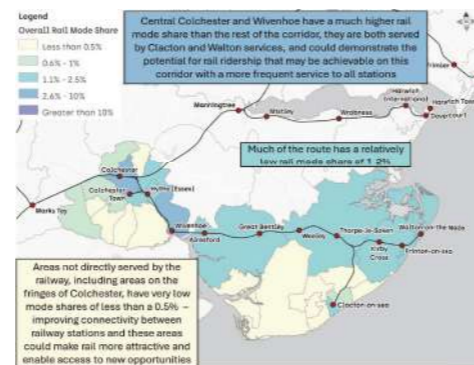
Paul Hollinghurst



Transport East's map identifies the many ways that regional rail services can be improved

While the plan contains many warm words, Railfuture pointed out that it is lacking in specific actions. Council support is offered for East West Rail, junction improvements at Haughley/Ely North and for electrification of the freight corridor – but Railfuture said the council needs to be more assertive in its support. The council may not have the resources to implement improvements itself but it does have influence. Railfuture wants the following aspirations to be included:

- More frequent services:** Aim for half-hourly services on all routes where the service is currently hourly. While not achievable in the short term on some lines, at least it is a starting point. An hourly service on the current two-hourly Ipswich-Peterborough route remains a priority, however.
- Better Suffolk-Cambridge links:** Give strong support to redoubling the line from Newmarket to Cambridge. This could massively increase rail journeys from Bury St Edmunds and Newmarket to Cambridge, as we now see with the very busy Ely to Cambridge route.
- Haverhill-Cambridge rail link:** It is not acceptable for Haverhill's population to expand towards 40,000 without a rail connection. A study commissioned by Railfuture showed that a rail or light rail link from Haverhill to Cambridge would be successful, with up to 2,000 daily journeys during the peak period alone.



The crucial Colchester-Clacton corridor

- Better connectivity for East Suffolk:** The council should support speed improvements for the East Suffolk line, where journey times are in some cases slower than they were 50 years ago, despite the introduction of new Stadler trains. Consider running through services to Leiston if and when Sizewell C works are concluded.
- Better accessibility for passengers:** There is a pressing need for better accessibility at many stations, especially the interchange station of Marks Tey (for Sudbury) where lifts are needed. Work on providing lifts at Stowmarket has started.

www.railfuture.org.uk/East+Anglia
 X @RailfutureEA

Severnside

Portishead go-ahead
 Campaigners for a reopened rail line to Portishead were celebrating received the amazing news that full funding for the project as part of Metrowest phase 1 had been obtained. Construction should start this summer after the government provided another £50 million.

North Filton could be next
 Design and preparatory works for a new station at North Filton, part of Metrowest phase 2, could soon be under way after nearly £3 million in funding was agreed by the West of England Combined Authority. The

new station will serve the £2 billion Brabazon housing scheme and the proposed 19,000 capacity YTL Arena, both being built on the former Filton Airfield.

Coop rail plans bid for cash
 A cooperative company which wants to operate a new open access regional service between Swindon, Taunton and Weston-super-Mare, via Frome and Melksham, has been given a year to raise £2.8 million. The Office of Rail and Road approved the plans on the understanding that Go-op proves it

has the money to fund some improvements to level crossings and that it has the trains to start the service.

New Bristol "gateway"
 A £95 million new pedestrian and cycle entrance over the river Avon is planned for Bristol's Temple Meads station, with a hub for 700 bikes and 350 cars. The "Southern Gateway" planning bid is expected in April.

Heritage link
 A new bid to connect the 20-mile-long West Somerset Railway to

mainline services has been launched. A business plan produced by WSR and Somerset Council to connect Taunton to the WSR's line to Minehead at Bishop's Lydeard has been submitted to the government. Bishop's Lydeard could become a commuter and tourist hub and the WSR would run trains throughout the year.

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Railfuture-inspired rail alliance

Newly elected MPs from each end of North Devon's Tarka line referred to the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, instigated by Railfuture in late 2023, in a Westminster Hall debate in December. On a motion introduced by Steve Race MP, the new Member for Exeter, "That this House has considered the future of rail services in Devon", he quoted from a recent meeting which he had had with representatives of the alliance. This drew a supportive intervention from Ian Roome MP, the new member for North Devon, which includes the South West's fastest-growing station at Barnstaple. At the other end of the Tarka line, Exeter's 10 stations are together by far the most-used from the 12 stations along the line.

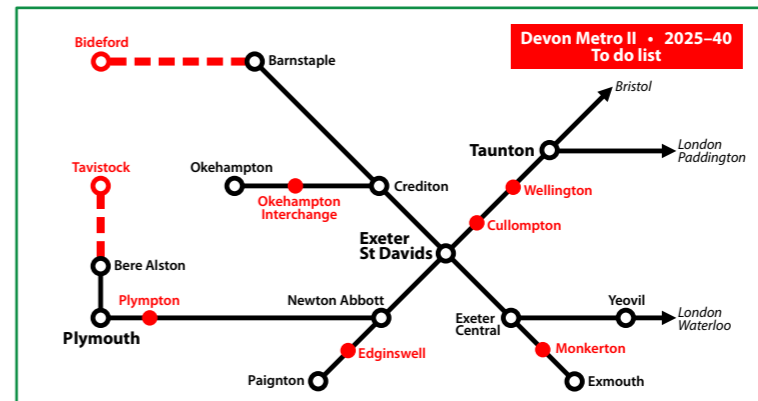
This is the second time in recent years that the Tarka line has been spoken about in a Westminster Hall debate – and of course recorded for posterity in Hansard. In January last year, the previous North Devon MP, Selaine Saxby of the Conservative



The moment in the House of Commons when Labour MP Steve Race highlighted the work of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance



The moment Lib Dem MP Ian Roome gave his backing to the work of the NDRDA



Railfuture's plan to build on the Devon Metro success. A campaign aim is to ensure it is included in local transport plans Map: Roger Blake

Party, spoke about the proposed Bideford extension in a debate introduced by former rail minister Kevin Foster on the Restoring Your Railway fund. Ms Saxby's speech followed her request for a briefing from the former Tarka Rail Association with assistance from Railfuture. More info:

<https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Bideford-and-Barnstaple-to-Exeter-diary>

Railfuture in the news

We make good use of social media (@RailfutureDC), including Facebook groups, ACE Rail and Tarka line friends and groups. Railfuture has also contributed to articles in the North Devon Journal, DevonLive and the North Devon Gazette. Branch Secretary Alan Clark featured in a DevonLive report about the Devon rail revival, referring to the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance.

The alliance's acting convener is Railfuture director Roger Blake, who was interviewed on New Year's Day by BBC Radio Devon:

<https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Railfuture-in-the-news>

Railfuture campaigns recognised

Network Rail has issued a new version of Connecting Communities: framework assessment of new station opportunities on Western Route. Bideford is one of five case studies. The new edition recommends that a minimum population of 10,000 is needed for a new station. The Greater Bideford area has a population of around 40,000 and has the second-equal strongest strategic case of the 23 potential stations studied in NR's western route area.

Railfuture welcomed the draft Devon & Torbay local transport plan for 2025-40 which includes proposals to accelerate and double services on the Tarka line. Railfuture went further, making the case for the Bideford extension. Journeys on the line increased by 12% from 2023 to 2024. Coupled with a 27% increase since 2019, the line

emerges with the best growth of any line in Britain. Railfuture has also developed a Devon Metro mark 2 plan for 2025-40 which we trust will be included when Devon County Council considers the draft local transport plan. Exeter is the worst place in the South West for traffic congestion, followed by Plymouth, and then Barnstaple. The traffic congestion figures support the case for modernising existing rail links. Railfuture's aims to upgrade rail

Barnstaple #597
 United Kingdom, Europe

Overview

597	Congestion Rank Worldwide	105	Congestion Rank in United Kingdom
22	Hours Lost in Congestion	£205	Cost of Congestion Per Driver

Worldwide traffic congestion figures from 145 countries are collected by INRIX Inc, a private company based in the USA. It provides both real-time and historical traffic data.

The cost of congestion in Barnstaple is £205 per driver and the town is ranked 105th in the UK congestion list.

INRIX also works with local authorities to digitise rules of the road for highly automated vehicles (HAVs) operating on public roads.

services on the Tarka line and extend to Bideford are recognised in the draft strategic implementation plan produced by sub-national transport body Peninsula Transport. In addition, the joint North Devon & Torridge economic strategy 2024-29 recognises that ensuring the Barnstaple-Exeter link has a journey time of under one hour and extending to Bideford are important.

Developing stakeholder alliance
 More parish councils keen to improve rail services are joining the

Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance which is holding its second annual convention in Barnstaple. Navantia, which has acquired Harland & Wolff's Appledore shipyard, will be attending. The alliance has also given presentations to Westward Ho! Ladies Club and the Rotary Club of Barnstaple Link.

Connect Bude
 The Bude Bus Branch-line Community Partnership, with help from Railfuture's fighting fund, will be gathering evidence to support integrating bus and rail connections for Bude and Stratton, as well as intermediate communities such as Holsworthy. The rail service is provided by the Dartmoor line, which will see the opening of Okehampton Interchange station next year.

Heathfield floods
 The ambitions of Heathfield Rail Link Association suffered a devastating setback when flooding from December's Storm Bert wreaked havoc with the trackbed, as well as the adjacent Stover Trail and former Stover Canal. Prospects for using the branch line as a test-bed for the Revolution very light rail demonstration vehicle, backed by Eversholt Rail, now look unlikely.

Tavistock rail reopening
 TavyRail is among the campaign groups nervously awaiting the government's spending review on 26 March. It is expected that there will be some up-to-date information about projects in the Department for Transport's cancelled Restoring Your Railway programme. Plymouth-Bere Alston-Tavistock already has a strategic outline business case, part-funded by Devon County Council.

GWR's fleet changes
 Two ex-Transport for Wales class 175 Coradia trains are being assessed at Laira depot in Plymouth. This is a preliminary step before the 27 Coradia trains are "cascaded" to replace withdrawn IC125 trains. The Coradias are 27 years old but have been refurbished and are capable of 100mph running. Some are two-car and some three-car units. The Coradias should also enable the withdrawal of class 150 trains and are expected to enter service on the Dartmoor and Tarka lines.

Devolution white paper
 The government is encouraging the emergence of strategic authorities with a population of at least 1.5 million. One possibility is a South West Strategic Authority taking in Cornwall and Devon, including Plymouth and Torbay, with devolved power to invest in transport. Railfuture will be on the look-out for new opportunities to progress our campaign schemes.

www.railfuture.org.uk/Devon+and+Cornwall+Branch

A new rail line to link Europe's Baltic states

Rail Baltica was Europe's flagship cross-border rail project, but rising costs have left Latvia struggling to find the money. Latvia's less costly plan is to build only single track on its territory. Julian Langston examines how Rail Baltica will provide a rail link from the Baltic to the Aegean Sea and bring standard gauge rail links to challenge the wider Russian gauge tracks which lead to Moscow



Architect's impression: Rail Baltica

Rail Baltica Estonia has launched a £47 million construction tender for the Ulemiste Linda International Passenger Terminal it plans to build in Estonia's capital Tallinn, designed by Zaha Hadid Architects

Rail travel around the Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia is not easy. There are not many lines, and except around the main cities services are sparse, slow, and can be expensive. There is no direct service between Tallinn and Riga, the capitals of Estonia and Latvia, although a daily train pair has connected Riga with Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, since 2023.

However, from the beginning of this year, timetables between the three countries were coordinated so that it is now possible to travel from Vilnius to Tallinn in a little over ten and a half hours, with changes at Riga, and Valga on the Latvia/Estonia border.

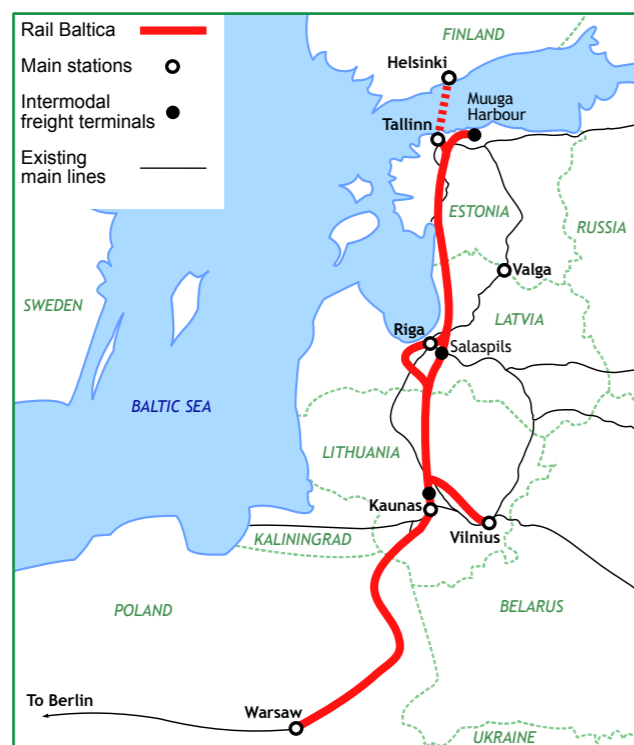
The rail route linking the three capitals is slow and indirect. This is hardly surprising as, when railways were developed in the nineteenth century, the three states were part of the Russian empire. The main lines were east facing, linking the principal cities with Moscow and St Petersburg. There is little on the north-south axis.

All this is about to change. In 2017, all three Baltic parliaments ratified proposals for a high speed rail link between the three capitals and other cities, including Warsaw in Poland. Dubbed Rail Baltica, most of the 950 kilometre line will be new, although parts of the stretch between Warsaw and Kaunas, Lithuania, will be an upgraded existing line. Tallinn-Vilnius via Riga is projected to take just three hours 38 minutes.

The mainly twin track electric railway will be standard gauge (unlike the broader Russian gauge of existing lines) and will be designed for speeds of up to 249kph (155mph), although operational speeds are expected to be slightly lower.

There will be multimodal freight terminals at Muuga Harbour (near Tallinn), Salaspils (near Riga) and Kaunas. Rail Baltica will be able to handle two to three freight (mostly intermodal) trains per hour, interleaved with fast passenger trains every two hours.

Finland may be included. There is a



Map: Julian Langston

Poland plays its part

Polish State Railways launched a £1.2 billion tender for the modernisation of its rail links to the Baltic states in January.

PKP's part of the Rail Baltica project involves upgrading its 100 kilometre Białystok-Elk line. A second track will be built alongside the existing line and will be equipped with the European Rail Traffic Management System. The Rail Baltica project is part of the European Union strategy to boost its military mobility, to help counter the threat from Russia. The number of NATO military trains arriving in Lithuania has increased every year since 2019, with a 40 per cent increase in 2023.

Poland's tender comes after Rail Baltica Estonia launched an £800 million tender in October to build a line from Ulemiste to Pärnu and a cross-border line from Pärnu to Ikla in Latvia.

Also in October, Lithuania signed an £81 million contract for the 17km Seta-Ramygala section. A 29 kilometre section to Panevezys in Lithuania's north is under construction.

proposal to extend the line through a tunnel under the Gulf of Finland to Helsinki, a little over 80km north of Tallinn. This is unfunded and, for now, the existing frequent ferry service will be the main link.

Politicians in the three countries are hoping the new railway will boost the regional economy by 0.5% - 0.7%, as well as providing important environmental benefits, such as encouraging significant quantities of freight to transfer from road to rail.

Rail Baltica has been described as a catalyst for building the economic corridor in north-east Europe, and it will facilitate moving freight between the Baltics and Western Europe via Warsaw and Berlin.

Although the combined population of the Baltic countries is only around six million (a little larger than that of Scotland), it is mostly concentrated in a few cities.

Construction started in 2019, most of which has so far been in Lithuania. A new station is taking shape in Riga next to the existing central station.

Progress, however, has been bumpy, with the project dogged by delays and cost overruns. An announcement in 2024 that the projected cost had more than doubled to £13 billion has jarred politicians across all three countries. Although Rail Baltica, as part of the North Sea-Baltic corridor of the EU's Trans-European Transport Networks, is receiving EU funding, it is not clear how much of the shortfall the Baltic countries are expected to find.

Cost-cutting measures are being sought and it has been suggested that, although all the structures will be built for twin tracks, only a single line would be built initially until more money is found.

One reason for the cost increase has been higher than expected inflation, in part due to the Russian war in Ukraine.

Ironically, this war has also increased the need for the railway. It would help to make the Baltics more west facing and less dependent on Russia and Belarus, with which they have borders.

The schedule for building the line has also slipped, with the original proposed opening in the mid-2020s being deferred to 2030, although it is hoped some sections of the line will be open by 2028. One cause of delays, particularly in Estonia, has been opposition, where some see the new route as too environmentally damaging.

Despite the problems besetting Rail Baltica, the line is under construction, with more sections expected to be started soon.

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No more SLUGS

Saltburn Line User Group members have decided to change their name and description. Representing as they do the line between Darlington, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Saltburn, they are now calling themselves Tees Valley Line Rail User Group, with the same objectives as they have always had.

New chair for the Bishop line CRP

There has been a user group on the Bishop Auckland to Darlington via Shildon line for several years, and the Department for Transport has annually confirmed its community rail partnership status. Now, after a review by its steering group two years ago, it has appointed a new chair – Paul Winstone – to promote the benefits of the Bishop line to the community generally. Paul is an engineer and has experience of governance with charities, and he has welcomed the chance to help with the preparation for Railway 200 as part of his role with the CRP.

Tyne Valley passenger figures

Amid the repeated news items about recovering rail use since the 2020 pandemic, it is interesting to read a full list of passenger figures for the Newcastle-Carlisle line, as supplied by the Tyne Valley CRP recently.

During 2023-2024, totals were increased by comparison with the previous year at every station, with the most remarkable being at Dunston (91% up), Metrocentre (62%), and Blyadon (70%), thanks to more trains calling at these stations. However, comparison with the figures recorded in 2019-2020 revealed some surprising changes – both down as well as up – with Brampton being 13.5% below 2019, Stocksfield 19.37% below, Wylam and Corbridge 7% down and Riding Mill 8.6% below its pre-Covid figure.

Even Carlisle itself recorded a drop of 5.46% over this period, so it is a relief to read of increases everywhere else – particularly at Dunston and Blyadon, both of which recorded over 120% improvements in patronage over the full four-year period. At least for now, the upward trend has returned to all the places which lost ground in past years.

Happy New Year for the Whitby line

For the second year running, Northern Rail ran a limited service on New Year's Day between Whitby, Middlesbrough and Darlington. The North East has long treated New Year's Day as a bank holiday, to the point where no trains have run, but there are welcome signs that attitudes are changing.

The introduction of TransPennine services through to Middlesbrough brought a train service to Middlesbrough on New Year's Day as a regular annual event – also giving



Peter Walker

Thornaby and Yarm some new year trains while the rest of the North East had to make do without them. Now it seems that Northern is looking to establish some new year trains on the Saltburn line at least, thereby taking a few faltering steps towards the seven-day railway concept that prevails elsewhere. Raifuture certainly welcomes this, and hopes that Boxing Day also can regain some train services.

East Coast timetable changes

A lot depends on where you live as to how you find the proposed service changes to the East Coast main line timetable. There has been particular concern about altered stopping patterns north of Newcastle, arising from Northern timetable changes, as well as from station calls to be made by CrossCountry and LNER trains in future. News that Transpennine semi-fast services between Newcastle and Edinburgh are to increase from five each way to eight, Mondays to Saturdays, has been welcomed, and hopes expressed that these services may henceforth be linked to the existing Newcastle-Liverpool trains when appropriate.

From more southerly viewpoints, two improvements stand out. One is that LNER's one daily Middlesbrough express will gain more intermediate stops – Doncaster, Retford and Peterborough – and the return train will leave King's Cross at a more useful 1845. The other is that, despite rumours to the contrary, many Durham Coast services will run through Newcastle rather than terminating, and will be semi-fast trains that will also add Stockton to their schedules. They will get slightly accelerated timings in spite of the extra stops. In addition, the all-stations services will, with few exceptions, continue to serve James Cook Hospital and Nunthorpe en route to or from Newcastle.

Durham looks to be very badly treated, with departures inconveniently bunched up. The two-hourly Newcastle-Reading CrossCountry service has still not been restored to its pre-Covid hourly frequency.

Durham loses because LNER has decided to run its fastest London-Edinburgh trains with fewer stops. They will omit Darlington and Berwick-upon-Tweed. Durham will, for most of the operating day, have no main-line LNER services to further north than Newcastle.

Durham's glaring timetable gaps need urgent action, especially after Teessiders have been told that the East Coast main line is too busy to accommodate Northern's originally proposed Connect services. These were planned to go from Middlesbrough and Stockton directly to Durham and Newcastle. Introducing Connect trains seems like a good solution.

www.raifuture.org.uk/North-East-Branch

X @RaifutureNEast

North East

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Think Green

Raifuture Thames Valley had its usual stand at the Oxford Green Fair at Oxford Town Hall in December and we were pleased that it was the busiest for years despite being a Sunday. Inevitably the overrun works at the Botley Road bridge were mentioned, but more positively there was much interest in the Cowley branch reopening, and a station at Wantage and Grove as well as reopening to Witney. The conversations with the public are invaluable for gaining insights into priorities.



Andrew McCallum



Raifuture's Roger Blake engaging with a young couple at Oxford Green Fair, Oxford Town Hall, 1 December 2024
Photo: Andrew McCallum

Oxford conference

We are grateful to Pete Brunskill, rail development lead at Oxfordshire County Council, for sponsorship. Raifuture was represented by director Roger Blake and Thames Valley branch secretary Andrew McCallum at the *Modern Railways* "Rail in Oxfordshire and the Midlands" conference in Oxford on 31 January. This high profile event was opened by OCC leader Liz Jeffman and Didcot & Wantage MP Olly Glover, both of whom spoke of the need for greater investment in rail in the county, and the latter including the station proposal at Wantage/Grove in his constituency. Other speakers in addition to Pete included Chiltern MD Richard Allan, GWR MD Mark Hopwood, EWR CEO David Hughes and representatives from Network Rail, Midlands Connect, West Midlands Rail Executive, Cross Country, GBRF and Oxfordshire CRP. Space precludes a full report here but Oxfordshire launched its Electrification Manifesto calling for electrification, full or partial, throughout the county, and there was much support for decarbonising rail whether by full or partial electrification, with support for both options

This is a good example of what a promotion should look like and we recommend other campaigns to consider making something similar – the cost is worthwhile. Do have a look.

GWR MD Mark Hopwood recently held an online Q&A session at which the branch was represented. Among the responses to questions from us he hinted at the potential in the future for GWR to compete with Chiltern for the Banbury-London trade.

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X @RaifutureTV

Thames Valley

evident. Pete Brunskill also raised the Oxford Station Masterplan, the Cowley branch with its good benefit to cost ratio, housing led improvements at several stations including Culham and Heyford, and the potential for a new station at Begbroke. Another theme throughout was the importance in the region of rail as an enabler, connecting people to employment, education, health services and so on and an ambition to cut car journeys by a quarter by 2030 and half by 2040. On the theme of connectivity, one of Pete Brunskill's observations was that currently Oxford is directly connected to a dozen other Russell Group Universities. Through trains to Bristol and completion of EWR to Cambridge will result in a couple more! As ever at such conferences, it

was the conversations in the breaks that also added value. Talking of EWR, Thames Valley Branch committee member Alan Francis has put in sterling work on our branch contribution to Raifuture's response to the recently closed consultation covering both the western and central sections of EWR in detail.

Witney campaign video
Raifuture Thames Valley is delighted to have been able to sponsor a new promotional video by Witney Oxford Transport Group:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBMSwMFCEaY

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Reasons to be cheerful – part two

By Roger Blake
and Ray King

Railfuture campaigners throughout the country have been nervously awaiting the government's spring forecast on 26 March.

Chancellor Rachel Reeves was expected to make a statement in the House of Commons making clear what rail infrastructure projects will be going ahead.

Portishead campaigners got their good news ahead of the statement but many other projects, including further electrification, which are vital for the future of the railways and action against climate change, are at stake.

Spirits had risen slightly since hopes were dashed in July after the general election, when the *Restoring Your Railway* programme was dumped. Now commentators predict that few are likely to survive as Department for Transport funded projects.

Devolution revolution

Pessimism about prospects for government support for some crucial schemes is tempered by opportunities arising from devolution of power from Whitehall to new strategic authorities in England.

Rail campaigners may have to re-target their action at new combined authorities, which will emerge in May next year.

Local rail campaigners will have to get to know the key people in those authorities to work with if the railway is to get bigger and better.

There will also be new mayoral authorities for Greater Lincolnshire, Hull and East Yorkshire, Devon and Torbay, and also for Lancashire.

Responsive Railfuture

Railfuture is already responding to calls for evidence and consultations in several areas, including the House of Commons transport committee's call for evidence for its *Rail investment pipelines: ending boom and bust inquiry*.

Although investment in infrastructure is generally welcome, the government has mistakenly overspent on many road projects which has led to increasing use of polluting transport when green rail and buses should have been promoted. Railfuture West Midlands is questioning the government's choice to encourage a third runway at London Heathrow when there is spare capacity at Birmingham airport. Birmingham Airport should be made the alternative to



Picture: Greater Anglia

Train operator Greater Anglia is taking action to highlight the work of many people who work behind the scenes to keep the trains running. It has launched a *We Are Greater Anglia* video which provides a peek behind the curtain on employees who contribute to the operator's record-breaking punctuality. The latest edition follows Irina (above) who works as a

train presentation team leader at Ilford depot, the base for class 720 electric suburban trains. She talks about her responsibilities, managing cleaners on shift, the rhythm of a day, and what it takes to keep the trains sparkling. To watch the video and others in the series, search YouTube for "We Are Greater Anglia"

congested Heathrow for long haul flights, particularly as Birmingham is already well connected by rail and road – and will get better.

When HS2 is built, Birmingham airport will be only 31 minutes from Old Oak Common as compared to 21 by the Elizabeth line to Heathrow.

However, the government is still encouraging people to use polluting forms of transport by allowing aviation fuel to be tax free, which provides airlines with a multibillion pound bonus.

Rail investment is often penny pinching by comparison, with East West Rail being built without being fully electric.

Ironically, the Department for Transport issued a press release in February saying government will be working with industry "to rewire the railways and unite train and track".

In theory, some of these counter-productive government policies could be solved with an effective integrated transport strategy.

To aid government thinking, local transport minister Simon Lightwood was despatched on a national tour in February. With little sense of the implications, the DfT described the tour as a series of 11 regional "roadshows" including Newcastle, Cornwall and Brighton. We know Mr Lightwood will use

trains so let us hope he also goes by local bus and gets on his bike to enlighten him about what is really needed for integrated transport.

MPs back rail boost

However good the rail connections to Birmingham are, improvements are still needed, argues Edgbaston MP Preet Kaur Gill.

The MP met with Midlands Connect and other rail chiefs at University station to discuss how plans for the Midlands Rail Hub could benefit her constituency.

The Midlands Rail Hub proposes major infrastructure to deliver up to 100 extra trains into and out of Birmingham every day, and help return to a "turn up and go" service on the Cross-City line through University and Five Ways stations.

The MP was joined by Councillor Majid Mahmood, the city council cabinet member for transport, and representatives from West Midlands Rail Executive, West Midlands Trains and Network Rail.

Lichfield MP Dave Robertson, Northfield MP Laurence Turner, Selly Oak MP Al Carns and Erdington MP Paulette Hamilton all backed the improvements the Midlands Rail Hub will deliver to their constituencies.

The Midlands Rail Hub project will provide access to new platforms at Birmingham Moor Street station

(adjacent to Curzon Street HS2 station, from both the Worcester/Bristol and Derby/Leicester directions. This will give scope for additional trains from all those locations without the need to use New Street station. An additional element of the project will be to directly link Coventry and Leicester and provide a completely new cross-Midlands inter-urban route.

Great British Railways

Meanwhile, the government is still trying to introduce new ways to run the railway.

It launched a consultation in February on the forthcoming Great British Railways Bill, which will allow Great British Railways to be the "single directing mind that will run our rail infrastructure and passenger services in the public interest".

One big improvement could be to create one inter-city network (incorporating CrossCountry as well as the main lines out of London) and one attractive website selling realistically priced tickets.

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