

Stop! Go! – Why not proceed with caution?

When things go wrong on the railway, passengers usually have to follow the advice given to them. I am fortunate to have some knowledge – and a ticket that allows me to vary from one service to another as I think fit.

I can often deduce for instance which train is likely to go first and where it is likely to be sidetracked or further delayed.

Thus I can dodge the worst privations but I sometimes see innocent people suffer as a result of the advice they are given.

But when I travelled from Stafford to Birmingham International, I was severely tested.

I went out one day, flew to Ireland for a meeting, and then back the next day.

The train journey to the airport took longer than the flight to and from Dublin!

After my experience I advise you not to change at New Street if you can help it – unless you are fit, can move with the alacrity of a gazelle and have the acutest hearing.

Also watch out for the very random way some trains miss Stafford out. Indeed you may find it quicker and more sensible to go via Cannock and Rugeley since express trains appear to be cancelled in a cavalier fashion. I witnessed more “class 1” cancellations in two days than, in the past, would have been tolerated over the entire region in two months.

A few days later I arrived at Newbury station to catch the 10.28 First Great Western to Paddington. The time was 10.09 and I planned to catch the 10.11 Thames train to Reading and

change. As I arrived, a Thames train left the station. I and two other hopeful passengers missed it. “Gone a minute early!” said one as he stormed off. But the disappearing train was the 09.41 running late.

Realising this, I hurried to the bay platform and just caught the 10.11. There was no attempt by staff on train or station to help passengers who were left with a bad impression of the railway.

The aim of all in the industry should be to operate so well that media criticism is rare.

This is difficult to achieve because much grassroots knowledge has gone. No longer are entrants to the industry taught, as we were, to be on the lookout for problems, doors on the catch, no tail lamp, tail lamps in the middle of the train and many other day-to-day things which went to build up a knowledge and a love of railway operating.

Unless that enthusiasm is regenerated, aided by training and expertise, staff will lose out on job satisfaction.

Unfortunately management seem to discourage staff widening their general knowledge.

Network Rail, which describes itself as “a company of engineering excellence” is never going to achieve operating excellence.

The bulk of the powerful people within the organisation have an engineering bias and their *raison d’être* is engineering – not running trains safely and efficiently.

So while they are erecting their plastic fences and blocking lines and running buses instead of trains the actual operators are left without the necessary knowledge and experience. To

shut all four lines as Network Rail does in many places and then talk about saving money and doing the work safely is to my mind simply abrogating its responsibilities. It puts more people on the roads – and at more risk of accidents and death than keeping the railway open would do.

Providing a bus service in place of trains can mean the train operator with interests in both camps getting a financial advantage. Talk about taking in your own washing and getting paid twice!

The malaise is further aggravated by an inexperienced Health and Safety Executive. The old railway inspectorate understood railway operation and also had the guts to take decisions. Any fool can say no.

I now see letters from the HSE which appear to show little understanding or knowledge of railway operating.

And I am not overly impressed when I see a signature followed by qualifications like “Eur Ing”.

I wonder how many qualified people have been involved in the ridiculous arguments going on for more than three years about the plan to run a vehicle up and down the branch between Stourbridge Town and the Junction on a Sunday.

Believe me, that should and could have been running two and a half years ago.

It is not only railways but in many industries where health and safety concerns are slowly strangling services. Risk assessment is all very well: Is it likely to happen and does it matter if it does? If the answer is yes and



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yes, then we must act. If no and no then let us proceed with care.

When things are not so clear cut, common sense can be applied without recourse to the panic response: Shut it down.

There seems to be no room in the railway industry for people prepared to stand up and be counted. Even Rail Regulator Tom Winsor is being replaced by a committee, probably of boring ex-railwaymen like myself!

To take away the strong, however outspoken, and replace with the pliable will always fail. It may seem strange that having given evidence at the Watford, Southall and Paddington accidents and argued on radio, television and in newspaper articles for a safer railway that I am now questioning the HSE.

I have come to that conclusion because unless some sensible relaxations take place, unless some of the engineering straight-jackets are removed, we will never go back to a railway operated properly at all times.

■ Peter Rayner is a former BR operations and safety manager.

A NEW guide was launched in October to help campaigners fight for better train services.

How To Win ... Rail Campaigns is packed with information, campaign tips and examples, and has the backing of TV star Michael Palin who is president of Transport 2000.

Jointly published by Railfuture, Friends of the Earth and Transport 2000, the guide draws on the experience of transport experts and campaigners in providing practical tips for improving rail services locally.

It is published in loose-leaf format to ensure it can easily be updated in the fast-moving world of railway policy. Campaigners are given an immediate opportunity to fight rail-funding cuts by writing to Transport Secretary Alistair Darling over recent cuts in the

‘How to win’ guide

rail improvement fund. Former Monty Python star Michael Palin said: “Campaigners have had considerable success in getting essential improvements to rail services and long may they continue to do so. This guide will encourage others to get involved by providing the skills and ammunition they need to ensure these vital services are protected and improved.

Friends of the Earth rail campaigner Richard Dyer, who is one of the authors of the guide, said: “Britain’s railways can and should be at the heart of a more environmentally friendly, integrated public transport system, providing a real alternative to

the car. This guide cuts through the complexities of the rail system to provide campaigners with clear tactics on how to make a difference and win the sort of comfortable, reliable service passengers want, from getting cycle lockers on the platform, to a whole new station.”

Commenting on the campaign to reverse the Government rail funding cuts, Railfuture campaigner Richard Pout, also an author of the guide, said: “One important funding source for rail improvements is the Strategic Rail Authority’s Rail Passenger Partnership scheme, but this has been frozen because of Government cuts. Rail cam-

paginers can start their campaign straight away by writing to Alistair Darling and demand that it is reinstated.”

How to Win ... Rail Campaigns can be ordered online at <http://www.foe.co.uk/pubsinfo/pubscat/guides.html>

Or by post for £5, including post and packing, from Railfuture, Room 206, The Colourworks, 2 Abbot Street, London E8 3DP. Make cheques payable to Railfuture.

You can download a version of the guide, but beware, it is 68 pages long, from: http://community.foe.co.uk/resource/how_to_campaign_guides/htw_rail.pdf