

Your letters

Who decides?

I am disturbed by Peter Davies' report in Local Action (*Railwatch* 107) that consultants have decided it would be viable to reopen the line from Harrogate to Ripon but "unviable" to extend the reopening as far as Northallerton. Who has made this decision? To my mind it is obvious that the line should reopen – and it should reopen all the way to Northallerton.

The only certain way to find out is to have trains running on it. Any rail line without trains is unviable.

I would also like to remind people that Dr Beeching did not close any rail lines. But both Tory and Labour governments did.

Malcolm Hicks, 4 Princes Road,
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Parkway threat

It was a rare treat to read some news from Severnside in *Railwatch* 107.

I search every issue to find out what is happening about the proposal for a Parkway (ominous word!) station on the north side of Gloucester.

So far nothing, which is a shame as it is in the early stages of "consultation" that people need all the information they can get.

There is a worry in Cheltenham that a Gloucester Parkway will drain passengers away from Cheltenham Spa.

Virgin are dying to cut Cheltenham off altogether and if it does lose business as a result of people unaccountably wanting to drive to Gloucester Parkway, Richard Branson might well have a case to put to the Department for Transport (or whoever decides these things).

Please can we have a bit of discussion going, before it's too late?

Cherry Lavell, 67 Brighton Road,
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Irony

I was interested to read the article in your April issue about the absence of stations at Langport and Somerton. It is supremely ironic that Langport is the home of the Somerset Trust for Sustainable Development, who have recently completed an environmentally friendly housing development in the town. Congratulations to STSD. The scheme achieved an "excellent" rating on the EcoHomes scale. However, through no fault of STSD, its rating would have been higher still had it not scored nil for public transport access (which is included in the EcoHomes assessment).

A bus service from Langport or Somerton to the station at Castle Cary – itself with a rather limited train service – was never really on, especially in a rural area where car ownership is inevitably high. I have sometimes used the bus to travel from Taunton to Langport, but

have found few passengers making the complete journey. Most passengers seemed to be using the bus for much shorter inter-village journeys, leaving those with a car to use it to get to Taunton and points further afield. Now where have we seen that pattern before?

Philip Bisatt, 11 Bracken Edge, West
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Open letter

The Department for Transport is trying to impose cuts in South West railway services from the end of the year when a new timetable comes into effect.

They include reductions in rolling stock, leading to worse overcrowding. Given the immediate cost and inconvenience of road congestion and the increasing threat of global warming, it is absurd to make public transport less attractive.

Bristol has compounded the mistakes of central government by withdrawing its £136,000 subsidy to the local rail service.

The effect of this is the loss of any chance of a half hourly service which will be felt throughout the Greater Bristol area. It is vitally



In March Swiss Railways celebrated 100 years of the Simplon rail link with Italy which was built in two stages, between 1898-1905 and between 1912-1921. The Swiss Post Office issued this special stamp

important that Bristol City Council implement the Joint Local Transport Plan it has drawn up with neighbouring authorities by ear-marking money from its transport budget to go towards leasing train units.

The economy and amenity of the conurbation depend on frequent, comfortable, reliable public transport. Money carefully spent to achieve it

is an investment in our future, not a handout to shareholders.

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The letter was also signed by Bristol Cycling Campaign, Bristol Permaculture Group, Bristol Primary Care Trusts, Bristol Friends of the Earth, Bristol Arena Concern, Henbury Community Council, Portishead Railway Group, Shirehampton Community Action Forum, Sustrans, Southville Community Development Association, Transport 2000, South West Network, Victoria Park Action Group and the Whiteladies Business Association.

Free buses

Local authorities are gradually introducing a government measure that will give those over 60 the entitlement to free local bus services. But will this have a negative impact on local railways? I know that if I were a pensioner still living in West Yorkshire, the new fare structure would encourage me to go by bus instead of rail. And surely this isn't what we want to see happening?

Tim Mickleburgh, 33 Littlefield Lane,
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Inflexible response

I often buy a first class Apex ticket when I travel to London and First Great Western provide an excellent service between Exeter and Paddington.

One problem with the Apex is that one must travel on a train specified when booking, possibly a month earlier.

On occasions, I arrive early at the station, and with the agreement of the conductor, travel on an earlier train. But on the last occasion, my way to the train was blocked by two staff who refused to allow me on to the platform to talk to the train

conductor. I was told that since the beginning of 2006, the operator had "got very strict" about the requirement to travel on the specified train. There was plenty of room on the 11.05 and I expect the situation was similar on the previous train, the 10.30, but apparently exceptions are now not allowed to the rules.

Apart from this irritation, First Great Western take great trouble looking after first class passengers.

Geoffrey Gill, East Cleave, Sourton,
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Modernisation

It is now some 30 years since the Bedford to Bletchley branch line was last seriously threatened with closure.

Thirty years on, the remaining section of the former Oxford to Cambridge line has seen significant investment and modernisation.

During a six-week blockade in the summer of 2004 all level crossings and signals were modernised.

Most recently, during the week commencing 13 February the 16.5 mile line was again closed for intensive modernisation. During a one-week blockade half a mile of track was relaid in both directions in the Ridgmont area; one mile was relaid on the up (to Bletchley) line at Bow Brickhill; 1.5 miles were relaid near Lidlington and a further 1.5 miles in the Millbrook-Stewartby area.

Network Rail has promised Silverlink once the track is fully tamped the line speed over much of the route will be raised from 40mph to 60mph for passenger trains and from 20mph to 40mph for freight.

The intensive track upgrade is primarily due to the large increase in freight activity planned from 1 April 2006 when the "virtual" quarry operation at Rugby on the West Coast main line is transferred to Forder's Sidings near Stewartby.

Silverlink has promised the local Bedford to Bletchley Rail Users' Association, that it will be pressing Network Rail for a speeding-up of the passenger service from the summer timetable in 2007. There are also growing hopes of an extension of the local passenger service north to Milton Keynes once the remodelling of both Bletchley and Milton Keynes Central are completed in 2007-8.

Richard Crane, 23 Hatfield Crescent,
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Chop and change

Keith Flinders' timely article Chop and Change in *Railwatch* 107 refers to the withdrawal of through trains mainly affecting the east and west Midlands. I can assure readers this phenomenon is also alive and well in western areas.

In 1998 we had a stall at a health and environment event in Abergavenny.

For this, I produced a quiz sheet, inviting people to guess how many destinations could be reached by through train from here, the aim being to show that rail travel could be much more attractive and convenient than maybe some



A works train at Millbrook station. See letter headed Modernisation

Pictures: RICHARD CRANE

imagined. After placing a tick in a box, participants were invited to turn over to check the answer – which was, just over 100. I listed 57 of the larger towns which could be reached without change of train. For simplicity I omitted the likes of Penally, Ty Croes and Wrenbury although of course they figured in the 100+ plus total.

After reading Mr Flinders' article I dug out these papers. In the present timetable, that 57 has been reduced by 27 – nearly half.

Most of the trains ran once per day only, but between them they gave us three daily through trains to Bristol at well-spaced intervals.

These began running in a more innovative era, before privatisation, and continued for a few years, under the same management.

Manchester-Penzance was the first to be introduced and last to be withdrawn. It ran seven days per week and kept going until December 2005, though with the northbound train terminating at Crewe by then. Right to the end the timetable showed it needed compulsory seat reservations. It was quite instructive to ride on the train and read the seat reservation labels.

Not many people travelled from Manchester to Penzance, but there were plenty of journeys such as Ludlow to Exeter, Hereford to Plymouth and so on.

Journeys such as these now need at least two changes of train, with attendant problems of making connections. All this arises from Strategic Rail Authority and now Department for Transport diktat.

But we now have much better services to north and west Wales, and more daily trains in total, serving a smaller range of destinations.

Whether this is seen as an improvement must largely depend on one's travel needs. It seems to be determined solely by franchise boundaries.

It's worth remembering that in the previous privatised era (pre-1948) the rail companies were quite good

at developing through services, with joint working, running powers, reciprocal use of servicing facilities, etc. This suggests that it is not the private ownership per se which is stifling such innovation, but rather the falseness of the industry structure.

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Through trains

The article Chop and Change in *Railwatch* 107 made some good points and I am concerned about the future of longer distance through trains.

Personally I do not mind making a change or two (as long as the journey time is not too extended and the stations are better than glorified halts). I appreciate, however, that for the infirm, those with a lot of luggage, or those who find stations confusing, this is not the case.

I can appreciate that train operators can keep to timetables if journeys are split up into bite-sized chunks but this is really just an excuse.

If Thameslink can operate four trains an hour from Bedford to Brighton via London Bridge then I suggest other through services are comparatively simple.

A typical example of a former through service is the semi-fast service from Euston to Birmingham, which ran on an hourly basis (later twice an hour) since electrification in 1965.

This was truncated at Northampton in 2004 with a Central Trains Northampton to Birmingham service introduced, on an hourly basis and stopping at all stations.

Northampton station is not suited to interchange. The farce is that Silverlink still operate most trains, which are, in reality, through trains that stop and restart later in Northampton.

This is not convenient for those who wish to use a slower service to avoid Virgin's sky high prices. A service that gives cause for concern

is Coventry-Nuneaton. When this closed in the 1960s it was a local service with intermediate stations.

Since reopening the only other station is Bedworth but the services continued to Leicester and Nottingham.

A useful through service linking the three main cities in the Midlands after Birmingham was formed. Since then the changes at Nuneaton have meant the end of the through service (not to mention busititution).

The Trainline website suggests travelling via Birmingham at certain times! Apart from inconveniencing passengers it is now far easier for those who count beans to show that the short section from Coventry to Nuneaton is not "paying its way" and chop it. I fear for the future unless it can extend to, say, Leamington with stations at Kenilworth and Warwick Milverton.

This is unlikely to happen, of course, because of single line issues (was the Coventry to Warwick line ever double?), and Virgin objecting to encroachment on its territory.

When there was the intention to restore a passenger service between Luton and Dunstable (killed off by many things including a ludicrous guided busway proposal) there was debate about having a shuttle service or a through service.

A through service would have needed a lot of changes of layout at Luton but I think it would have been the answer.

People do not want to have to change after 10 minutes. The benefit to the town in having a through service to London (and beyond) would have been considerable. Equally important the operating costs, compared with termination at Luton, would be marginal.

Passengers want through services and their existence shields less well-used stretches against "cherry picking" closure proposals.

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Bikes and busy trains

Railwatch 107 contained an item about the restrictions imposed by Southern on carrying bicycles during peak periods, but the attached editors' comment is slightly misleading.

Southern's decision follows a survey of Brighton and both of Southern's London termini which we carried out in 2005. Their adopted policy is one of a number of alternatives we suggested.

We share your views that sustainable travel needs to be promoted, but it really is not the case that there is much spare capacity in the contra-peak direction.

A number of train operators in the South East have significant contra-peak flows which, combined with shorter train formations in that direction, mean that standing is not uncommon and (regrettably)

being left behind is not unknown. However, cyclists can always get on Thameslink trains.

Dr Nigel G Harris, Managing Director, The Railway Consultancy, Crystal Palace station SE19 2AZ nigel.harris@railcons.com

Trams for future

Railwatch 106 made depressing reading, and indeed, one may well ask what qualification a lawyer has to be Secretary of Transport. But to be particular, with all those rails already delivered, surely an urban area the size of Merseyside could muster the resources to start construction of the tramway on routes which are likely to show an early return on investment.

As there seems to be an increasing realisation of the efficiency of tramways, one may ask whether it is not too late to endeavour to set up stan-



A Swiss stamp commemorating 100 years of the Bern, Lotschberg, Simplon Railway

dards which could form a pattern for any future lines, matters such as gauge and design of rolling stock.

Although I think most tramways in England in the past have been standard gauge, metre gauge might often be adequate, and offer advantages in cheapness of construction and dealing with sharp curves in an urban area. Cars should be designed to run singly during slack hours, and in tandem when needed during rush hours.

I would be against the – if I remember correctly – permanently coupled cars in Sheffield, likewise their rather lavish presentation; most tram journeys are fairly short, and closely spaced wood or plastic moulded seats are adequate, apart from lending themselves less to vandalism than upholstery, but with plenty of standing room and grab rails. It could be a help if a standard design were evolved, so new or existing systems could buy cars off the shelf, hopefully from a British manufacturer, with probable savings in cost.

Although many British towns are congested in the centre, it is worth looking at the possibilities of vehicles running in a reserve where streets are wide enough; I recall the excellent system at The Hague, also the visual and audio intimations of the stops.

Another field bearing examination is that of the fixing of fares, flat, by distance, or by zones, and their collection. Given the amount of fare evasion on the railways, this can be a real problem. It would be interesting to hear some comments by others on the points I have raised.

Alan Dodson, 6 Newtown Road, Malvern, Worcs WR14 1NZ

Axing Saver return

It is obviously devastating news for rail travellers that the train operators are considering axing the Saver returns. However matters could be worse.

Should the Government continue to turn its back on a National Railcard, the train operators could finish up

shooting themselves in the foot if customers are expected to pay the full whack! With so many people being put off rail travel this would no doubt result in a substantial loss of revenue for the Rail industry. Additionally there could be a greater encouragement towards fare evasion. The matter could also provoke assaults on railway staff in some cases.

David Bailey, 27 North Lodge Close, Dawlish, Devon EX7 9QD davidpbailey77@hotmail.com

Tickets

The article *Fare Play?* was interesting: articles on the complexity of fares always are. In recent years I have travelled north from Stevenage a few times by GNER and by booking ahead have managed to get cheap fares, usually in the form of "standard off peak return".

On the Trainline website recently I have not been able to find any of these, the cheapest being Saver returns. I wrote to GNER wondering exactly when the window for these tickets is, was I going in too early or too late? Their reply suggested that I must be too late as the window opens about 10 to 12 weeks in advance (although according to Trainline this category of ticket seems to have vanished).

However I have found on Trainline a hint that "two singles could be cheaper" and this seems to be the case. The two singles add up to the same as the old "standard off peak return". I offer this information to those happy to book well in advance.

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Danger signals

I am sure we have all seen the reports on the Government's "consultative" document about the future of rural railways. Unfortunately consultative documents have a nasty habit of becoming policy.

Might I suggest we take action

now to crush these proposals? Railfuture is numerically small but could we not forge an alliance with other interested parties such as the Countryside Alliance, the environmental lobby, trades unions and most importantly, political parties such as the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists who will bear a great deal of the pain that closing rural railway lines will bring, but also the Lib-Dems who tend to be more pro-public transport, the Green Party and sympathetic Labour and Conservative MPs.

I feel that not only should the proposed reductions be fought but the battle should have a second part, to increase investment in rural railways and thereby hopefully increasing their income and securing their future.

May I suggest a first stage would be for Railfuture to get all parties together to form a campaign committee which could then direct the strategy and try to reverse the anti-railway attitude that is now prevalent?

Peter Maybury, 12 Surrey Gardens, Finsbury Park Avenue, Haringey, London N4 1UD

Value of buses

Buses have their place in public transport but not as "cheap" replacements for trains, trams or light rail. They are not suitable for Cambridge-St Ives.

Buses may cost less to buy initially but, with the exception of the legendary Routemaster, do not last as long as trams or trains which are also more fuel efficient. Over-all trams and trains are more cost effective in the long term.

Roger A Smith, 67 The Street, Little Waltham, Chelmsford CM3 3NT

Freight

We had occasion to travel to Luton last weekend, a journey that is not particularly easy or economical by rail, so used my car and travelled south over part of the M40 between Warwick and Banbury. During that short trip we took note of the HGVs using that route and it became something of a joke to find a British registered vehicle.

Although there were vehicles from all over Europe a substantial number were from Poland and this led me to wonder just what loads they may have been carrying, where they had been and whether a direct freight rail service would be feasible between the UK and Poland. Of course any such rail service would have to compete with the lower fuel costs and wages that apply to East European HGVs.

Of course there may already be such a direct rail service but I have not noted any Polish rail wagons, probably because they would be out of gauge.

Alan Crowhurst, Lower Inhedge, Cleobury Mortimer DY14 8AH AlanEADC@aol.com

Change at Brussels

It's progress that Eurostar can offer a guaranteed connection at Brussels for Amsterdam and Köln, but



A toast to Railfuture

Visitors to the London Beer Festival in March were presented with a free copy of *Railwatch* and an invitation to join Railfuture.

The Railfuture marketing initiative was organised by volunteer Laurence Fryer who is also involved in the Campaign for Real Ale.

He reports seeing many of the festival visitors reading *Railwatch* and membership secretary David Harby subsequently reported an increase in membership applications as a result.

If you can do something similar with a group or event you are involved with, copies of *Railwatch* can be made available.

I would rather wait for a through train.

With open access throughout Europe perhaps we will see Thalys or DB providing the service if Eurostar finds it uneconomic.

Chris Barker, 46 Redston Road, Hornsey, London N8 7HJ c.barker@lineone.net

East-West rail

In answer to Mr Hobourn (Letters, *Railwatch* 107) the hills to which he is referring are part of the Greensand Ridge, close to Liddington station.

It would be relatively easy to provide a route south of the hills from near Ridgmont station to Flitwick (indeed, part of this corridor is used by the M1), or a longer route, but with less new track needed, north of the hills leaving the Marston Vale line near Millbrook station.

In fact, the hills would be much less of a problem for this route than they would have been for the existing Marston Vale line, as is demonstrated by the fact that the preferred option for the Bedford and Milton Keynes Canal (which largely parallels the railway) is expected to incorporate a level changer nicknamed the Brogborough Whirl, which may become a tourist attraction comparable to the Falkirk Wheel, with Liddington as the most convenient

access for rail passengers. An electrified Ridgmont-Flitwick route, in conjunction with a Bletchley north curve, would be very handy when the West Coast main line is blocked for engineering work or other reasons. It would also offer opportunities for WCML trains to serve Luton, and for Thameslink trains to serve Milton Keynes and Northampton.

I first publicly advocated Mr Rothwell's suggested through route to Stansted Airport in my response to the Stansted Airport public inquiry held over 25 years ago. Then I believed that it should become the main east-west link, but now I think we need a direct Bedford-Cambridge route as well.

Simon Norton, 6 Hertford Street, Cambridge CB4 3AG S.Norton@dpmms.cam.ac.uk

New line

I read R J Hobourn's letter with interest, but considerable surprise because there is clearly no need for a tunnel or a rack railway to link Ridgmont and Flitwick.

Ridgmont is at about 80 metres above sea level, as is Flitwick. If on leaving Ridgmont the new line turns (gently) right to an east, then east-south-east direction to bring it alongside the M1, the maximum altitude reached is 100 metres – nearly two kilometres after leaving Ridgmont, making a gradient of about 1%, or 1 in 100.

This section of line would not cross the Chilterns – the Midland main line and the East Coast main line do cross the Chilterns (through gaps) – but well to the south of where my proposed section joins them.

M J Rothwell, 7 Chapel Mews, Chippenham, Wilts SN15 3AU rothwellmj@supanet.com

Too much pressure

You say quite correctly that one of the Government's biggest failings is not keeping up with the public debate on the environment. I belong to, or support, many pressure groups with very different special interests who are all saying this about the Government. In fact, its complete failure to have any joined-up strategy on the big environmental issues is widely seen as a national scandal.

Unfortunately the same failing can be seen among the pressure groups. For example I know of bodies that exist to protect the countryside who will, one moment, oppose wind farms and call for more support for (car-borne) tourism within the countryside, and the next complain about global warming and the building of new roads.

Railfuture is not immune from these double standards. It is happy to play the global warming and countryside loss cards when promoting transfer of freight from road to rail for example, but conveniently ignore them when it comes to promoting new high-speed passenger lines, which would need land take and are not energy efficient.

This is not to say that any of these policies are right or wrong. There are pros and cons to them all, which means the case for each can only be made in the context of a well understood national environmental strategy.

We should have to demonstrate that each policy is a piece of a jigsaw that builds up with the other pieces to a coherent plan of action.

In a letter in the same issue Doug Smart points out how the Liberal Democrat party picks and chooses its environmental concerns, often supporting damaging schemes. But isn't that exactly what most pressure groups do?

What we need is for a wide range of different pressure groups to get together and agree a joint national strategy, a process that would involve some compromises.

Then, each would accept responsibility for promoting only those aspects which directly effected their own area of interest.

To give an example of a compromise that might be necessary, a national environmental strategy would certainly seek to reduce overall need for travel and transport.

On its own, that it is not good for rail, so Railfuture would concentrate on promoting transfer of traffic from road to rail, and improved energy efficiency of rail, and not support overall travel growth in its own right. The long and short of it is that it is no good trying to sing the environmental hymn unless we can all sing from the same sheet. We need an environmental charter that all interested pressure groups can sign up to.

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Editors' note: The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect Railfuture policies.



A women's group is the first to adopt a station in the West Midlands, under a new scheme introduced by Central Trains. The Solihull and District branch of Soroptimist International has adopted Widney Manor station, on the Birmingham Snow Hill to Leamington Spa line.

Members of the Soroptimists will help out with gardening and improving the general appearance of the station. Andy Thomas, operations director for Central Trains, said: "We are confident they will make the station and surrounding environment better for everyone using it." Sixty five other groups are interested in other stations.

Jenny George of the Soroptimists said: "Widney Manor railway station is at the heart of its local community and we want to create a really attractive environment not only for regular users but for visitors to Widney Manor."

Adopt a Station offers volunteers an official way in which they can help, perhaps with publicity, improving the station environment, gardening or helping with passenger surveys.

Volunteers can obtain an information pack by email from adopt.station@centraltrains.co.uk or calling 0121 654 1257

Picture: CENTRAL TRAINS