

Repairs must not stop the trains

Since last I wrote for *Railwatch* we have had the Cumbrian crash and seen Sir Richard Branson on the TV talking nonsense about train control by the driver after derailment, as well as a frank approach from the chief executive of Network Rail which makes me wish he was staying.

I thought it remarkable that Sir Richard was allowed on to the track without high visibility clothing and able to talk about the Pendolino sets as if they were the only crashworthy rolling stock in the country.

I chaired the inquiry into the head-on crash at Colwich in 1986 and one fatality, tragic though it was, proved the crashworthiness of Mark 3 rolling stock.

It is to be hoped the Rail Minister Tom Harris is able to grasp enough about crashworthiness to ask why the Department for Transport are continuing to allow the use of 142s which are not crash-worthy, yet not using some 150s which are. Can't be money, I am sure.

Talking of money, I am struck by how similar Network Rail are to Railtrack and how much they eulogise about property deals rather than rail improvements.

The plan to build over Euston caused great excitement and the new chief executive elect Iain Coucher talked about once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. If Network Rail restricts the approaches to Euston when we have just got them right (2003) and start putting down great pillars to sustain a raft above, it will be a shame.

In any event, while making money from land deals it will be able to mess up the train service week after week, cancel it at weekends, and still congratulate itself.

Still, as they propose to do the same at Birmingham New Street probably over the same timescale, anyone travelling between Birmingham and London for the next four or five years had better get a Chiltern season ticket and snooze from Snow Hill to Marylebone.

Talking of engineering muddles, I complained in *Railwatch* 111 about Portsmouth and said I hoped Basingstoke would not follow suit as it was a very important junction.

In fairness NR has completed its major blockade on time and in reasonable order, proving again that putting in technically tried systems, and sensible signalling panels works.

The bigger the step forward by the innovators of this world the bigger the gulf they create between themselves and the users of the equipment - for example: Portsmouth and Stockport. Sadly one swallow does not make a summer. Everywhere else I look it is the same



NIGHT WORK: On the London Underground at Hammersmith

Picture: Metronet



Rayner's Review

engineering-led shambles. Easter was a farce if you wanted to travel by rail. Euston was closed and the only way south from Birmingham was via Banbury and thence by Chiltern line to Marylebone. There was nothing south of Banbury because of blocks on the Great Western main line. And then there was Basingstoke of course. Portsmouth was still a mess left over from Christmas and so all the Basingstoke diversions were less effective as the alternative route to Southampton was restricted. There was only one train an hour from St Pancras, and King's Cross was closed for renewals.

Big winners at Easter were the bus companies.

Even the pensioners' free travel is labelled the bus pass legislation and while it is good to see the system being extended it may well be another nail in rail branch lines for I am told services in Wales, Cornwall and in Scotland have shown abstraction from rail.

Ray Bentley's article in *Railwatch* 111 should alert us all and when I get a moment I hope to collaborate with him on some analysis.

Big winners with pensioners' travel are the bus companies.

I had to travel from Andover to Preston on May Bank Holiday Sunday and I had to be there by lunchtime or early afternoon.

I looked the journey up on the Rail Planner and was advised to leave Andover on Saturday evening in a westerly direction, change at Salisbury and again at Bristol and then wait through the night hours and journey on via Hereford.

Fortunately my blood pressure stayed reasonable enough to carry on searching. There were no trains,

only a bus from Andover, so I thought I would stay in London and travel down from Euston on Sunday morning.

Would you believe the 09.07 from Euston is a bus to Milton Keynes?

I decided I would rather drive to Newbury and catch the train to Reading where I caught the 10.10 and changed at Coventry, getting to Preston near enough to my requirements.

Big winners again are the bus companies.

All this reinforces my view that the much-maligned BR was 10 times better than this Monday to Friday engineering-led lot at Network Rail. We would have run extra trains to holiday destinations, extra football specials, overnight sleepers, paper trains and a postal network and still maintained the track.

We had operating skills and we used diversionary routes. Trains were strengthened with extra coaches and the system not tied up with contracts.

Talking of extra coaches, this simple Trains Office clerical task has been turned into something mystical.

Secretary of State for Transport Douglas Alexander, in a speech to the *Rail* magazine conference said: "My department is actively considering exactly where the carriages need to be added."

Later in the same speech he talked about coming to terms with decades of under-investment but conveniently forgot to mention that he will also have to tackle almost a decade of Railtrack failing to maintain the railway properly.

We have had under-investment for years but it was well maintained by BR.

When we at BR did do renewals, we did them effectively and without building a small village of huts and plastic fences and without days of disruption. Yes of course

we had problems getting money from government, but we also had to tackle some of our own lack of productivity.

It was not a one-way process with the department making uninformed detailed small decisions as it does today.

We had Secretaries of State who were big people making the big decisions and not mumbling clichés and allowing some replacement of assets to become more important than the task itself.

What Mr Alexander and his fellow Scottish MP Tom Harris should be doing is tackling big issues, starting with asking themselves whether simply saying "Network Rail have taken maintenance in house and left renewals in the hands of contractors" means anything at all.

If you have the same staff, unless you train properly, supervise correctly, audit frequently, and have sufficient staff in the first place, talking about in-house maintenance is so much hot air.

They tell me use of tamping machines is now classed as renewals and therefore can be done by a contractor.

In reality, a tamper machine is merely the equivalent of about 34 people with shovels cleaning the ballast.

It is maintenance, not rocket science, and it should not be classified as renewals either.

I thought the accountants were bad enough but now I am beginning to feel civil engineers en masse are worse.

But before I am accused of prejudice, I promise you that some of my best friends are civil engineers!

■ Peter Rayner is a former British Rail operations and safety manager.