

East Midlands

By Anthony Kay

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■ ■ Commuters win reprieve
Campaigning commuters from Bottesford on the Nottingham-Grantham line have saved two important evening services which were set to be axed in the December 2008 timetable. The withdrawal of the Bottesford stop on the 17.50 and 18.50 departures from Nottingham would have left villagers without a service leaving the city between 17.34 and 20.51. The campaign, which included the website www.keepstoppingourtrains.co.uk persuaded East Midlands Trains to do detailed counts of passengers using the evening commuter services, and as a result the threatened services were reinstated.

■ ■ Station improvements

Nottingham City Council approved plans for a 950-space multi-storey car park at Nottingham station in December, although the design remains controversial. Then in January plans were unveiled for a £14.5million revamp of Derby station, including new bus interchange facilities.

At Northampton, a plan to rebuild the station as part of a redevelopment scheme also involving a hotel, offices, shops and houses, may be scaled back because of the credit crunch. However, West Northamptonshire Development Corporation still hopes the station will be completed by 2014. Northampton Rail Users' Group has reminded the developers that the station needs a fourth platform when it is rebuilt.

■ ■ Integrated transport for beer lovers

Railfuture member David Fursdon is involved with organising the Welland Valley Beer Festival on 13 June. He is encouraging visitors to the festival to use the heritage bus from Market Harborough station. Visitors will be able to admire the 82-arch Haringworth viaduct but, since the date is a Saturday, they presumably won't be able to watch any London to Melton Mowbray trains pass over it – unless local campaigners meet with unprecedentedly rapid success in their efforts for better services northward from Corby!

■ ■ National Forest Line

Still no good news on the reopening of the line from Leicester to Burton-on-Trent, which at one time was scheduled to open in 1995 but then fell victim to privatisation. The latest report on the reopening has costed it at £50million and says that passenger numbers would need to be 10 times the estimated 150,000 per year to make it financially viable. Leicestershire County Council cabinet member for transport, Nicholas Rushton, intends to ask the Government to contribute to the costs.

Questions for would-be MEPs

Railfuture's international committee has prepared a list of railway and transport questions for candidates in the European elections in June.

Our questions were sent to the parties rather than to individual candidates because in European Parliament elections we have to vote for a party list, not for one or more individual candidates.

We have asked the parties to address such issues as the need for a level playing field between air and high-speed rail, comparable rights for passengers on all modes of public transport, easy booking facilities between British and Continental stations, accessibility of ferries for foot passengers, freight services through the Channel Tunnel, and rail access to UK airports.

We have also offered to meet representatives of the political parties to discuss what the Parliament can do for rail users over its four-year term.

Mystery of new inter-city train

Rail campaigners were puzzled by February's announcement that £7.5billion is to be spent on a new fleet of trains to replace the 30-year-old diesel InterCity 125 trains and the 20-year-old electric InterCity 225s.

Some of the 125mph "super express" trains will be electric, some diesel and some "bi-mode" so that they can travel on both electrified and non-electrified lines. They will be delivered in four to six years time.

But the announcement by Transport Secretary Geoff Hoon was made before any firm announcement on whether the Great Western and Midland main lines are to be electrified.

Until a decision is made on electrification – possibly in the spring or summer – it cannot be known how many of each type of train will be needed.

There is also the alarming possibility that the Government has backed away from approving more electrification.

The Government has chosen Agility Trains as the preferred bidder for the contract to build and maintain the new fleet of trains.

It said the new trains would replace existing high-speed trains on the Great Western and East Coast main lines. There was no mention of the Midland where 125s also operate.

Agility – a consortium of John Laing, Hitachi and Barclays – will build a new train factory in Britain, as well as depots in Bristol, Reading, Doncaster, Leeds and west London and upgrade existing depots.

Mr Hoon said the "inter-city express programme" was the biggest single investment in inter-city trains for a generation.

He added: "Over 12,500 jobs will be created and safeguarded."

Professor Andrew McNaughton, Network Rail's chief engineer, said: "We have worked with DfT to optimise the design of both train and infrastructure to give the best capacity and passenger experience and the best whole life costs.

"This is a big train, but it will tread softly and so reduce the amount of maintenance and network downtime needed."

Alec McTavish of the Association of Train Operating Companies said: "The fleet is essential if rail's potential to reduce the UK's carbon footprint and transport congestion is to be realised."

The secondary bidder was Express Rail Alliance (Bombardier Transportation, Siemens, Angel Trains and Babcock & Brown).

It has been asked to continue as reserve bidder in case the DfT cannot do a deal with Agility.

The Government said the "super express" trains will be cleaner, greener and generate less noise



HITACHI'S FIRST BRITISH TRAIN: The class 395, which will operate high-speed services over the Channel Tunnel high-speed rail link to London St Pancras from December 2009 Picture: Hitachi

than the trains that they will replace.

Despite being larger, the new trains will be up to 17% lighter than their counterparts, making them more energy efficient and faster at accelerating.

The electric version will include regenerative braking and the diesel version will have "hybrid power technology" to reduce fuel consumption by up to 15%.

The trains "will reduce overcrowding" as they will be longer. The new carriages will be 26metre long compared to the current 23metre vehicles.

They will carry up to 21% more passengers per train and the faster journey times will allow operators to run more frequent services.

The DfT said a typical journey between London and Leeds could be cut by around 10 minutes.

Critics warn that buying diesel trains is "economic and environmental madness".

They say the Government should concentrate on building electric trains and electrifying new lines.

Others warn that the extra length will mean the carriages will be narrower and more cramped than existing HSTs or 225s.

That means that there could be pressure to reduce space for catering, luggage and cycles.

It has also been revealed that the bodysells will be built in Japan, and Hitachi's design and development work will remain in

Japan. Although Britain has fallen behind the rest of the world, it has – because it failed to electrify – become expert in building and maintaining high-speed diesel trains.

Now it is buying in that technology from abroad, even though Japan does not operate high-speed diesel multiple units.

Nor is Hitachi well known for high-speed diesel trains.

It did however sell 100 diesel multiple units to Taiwan in the early 1990s and those trains have gained a good reputation for reliability.

What is also curious is the apparent decision to replace the East Coast main line trains.

The Mark IV coaches and electric locomotives are much more modern than HSTs.

Could the decision have been made because the new Hitachi train can be delivered in an electric version first, probably based very much on the class 395s pictured above?

If there was a speedy decision to go ahead with high-speed rail, we could have many more trains built to Berne gauge clearances and the UK could buy cheaper "off the shelf" trains from Europe.

Maybe more money could be saved long term if the Government approved both a wide-ranging electrification and gauge-widening programme.

This could be achieved without too much difficulty on the Great Western line which was built for Brunel's broad gauge trains. Of

course Berne gauge would clear the way for double-deck trains. Another advantage of electrifying the Midland main line is that depots at Sheffield and/or Gateshead could deal with the combined fleets of the Midland and East Coast main lines.

Maybe the Treasury and the DfT are looking at doing the job once again on the cheap – with the result that Britain is saddled with a less than ideal railway and transport system.

Maybe an opportunity to be both innovative and bold has been missed. Is this another example of the great British disease of "make do and mend"?

Not surprisingly, the decision has upset people who want to see more train building expertise and jobs maintained in Britain.

Bob Laxton, Labour MP for Derby North, said: "This is a crass decision. I simply cannot understand it."

Keith Hazlewood of the GMB union said: "We need to clarify what on earth is going on and how much work will be done in this country."

Mr Hoon also announced that the Department for Transport is in advanced negotiations with National Express East Anglia to provide 120 new carriages for the Stansted Express service.

The preferred bidder for this order is Bombardier Transportation, which plans to build them in Derby.

Severnside

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■ ■ City sites

The branch responded to Bristol City Council's "Call for Sites" in December by submitting proposals to safeguard sites for new stations at Ashton Gate (on the Portishead line) and Henbury (between Avonmouth and Filton), both on routes which are currently freight only. In the same exercise we asked for protection of the formation which used to carry the third and fourth tracks on the existing main line between Dr Day's Junction and Filton Abbey Wood.

■ ■ Sites that need safeguarding for stations

We have also written to South Gloucestershire Council asking for sites to be safeguarded at Charlton Common and North Filton. A station at Charlton Common could serve the Cribbs Causeway shopping complex and the proposed Catrain development. Special thanks are owed to Bristol members of the committee and to Peter Gould and Eric Wildman of Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FoSBR).

■ ■ Cash appeal for rail reopenings

John Dixon represented the branch at a South West Regional Assembly transport seminar at Weston-super-Mare on 26 November. The Assembly was expected to submit its Regional Funding Allocation bid to the Government for transport projects in February. We and FoSBR have asked for reopening of the Portishead line and the Henbury loop to passenger trains to be a high priority.

■ ■ More long-distance rail links

Following the branch's input to the CrossCountry timetable consultation (*Railwatch* 115), Lydney now has a direct train to Birmingham and Nottingham for the first time in five years. This is the 06.40 Cardiff, which calls also at neighbouring stations in Monmouthshire.

■ ■ Battle to save station site

We have continued the fight to protect the Radstock station site from a proposed housing development (*Railwatch* 115). In a letter to Bath & North East Somerset Council's Director of Planning we pointed out that Bath Spa could not be a satisfactory railhead for Norton-Radstock because of congestion and limited parking. We added that we were not opposed to some new houses being built on former railway land as the new residents were potential customers for a revived train service to Frome and beyond.

■ ■ Railfuture on air and in the press

Bruce Williamson was interviewed on GWR FM radio. His press release drew a response in the *Somerset Guardian* from the chairman of the Norton Radstock Regeneration company which strenuously denied that it was opposed to reopening of the railway.

Railfuture tourist leaflet campaign

During 2008, a special Railfuture leaflet with a response form was on display at over 340 heritage railways and centres, museums and tourist attractions in Britain. We gained new members and a wealth of comments on train and bus issues. The responses were analysed by our member Tony Kirby, and Lloyd Butler has sent the report to many tourist outlets, together with a fresh supply of leaflets for their 2009 season.

We learnt that more can be done to publicise public transport to tourist such destinations. Many of these issues will be addressed in a new Railfuture membership leaflet due out in the early summer.