

A lesson from Karlsruhe

By Michael Weinberg

I have seen the future and it works. This well known quotation sprang to mind during a recent visit to the German city of Karlsruhe.

The only vehicles allowed in the city centre are trams and bicycles. Superb tramcars whisk the lucky citizens from suburbs far and near, sometimes sharing tracks with main line trains, right into the bustling heart of the city.

To watch the rich inhabitants of this beautiful city crowding on to trams on a Sunday morning for a day out in the Black Forest is a sight to behold and gives the lie to the gloom and doom merchants who constantly tell us first, that people can't be weaned away from their cars and second, that car use restrictions spell death to the prosperity of our towns and cities.

Just the opposite is the case, and if our leaders want to see how it can be done, I say: "Go to Karlsruhe!"

First impressions of the place are that it is uncannily quiet, with an absence of traffic, which leaves the visitor from Britain brought up on noisy, traffic-clogged roads slightly bemused.

When we first walked out of the main station after arrival, one was reminded of a very early Sunday morning in an English village, instead of mid-day on a Friday in the centre of a German city. Wide streets and hardly any traffic, except trams. What a paradise!

Karlsruhe Hauptbahnhof (the main station) like most of



Integrated transport: A tram inside Karlsruhe railway station

Picture: Michael Weinberg

Germany's large stations is very user-friendly, particularly if, like we were, encumbered by heavy luggage.

All platforms are easily accessed by lifts or escalators, all platform indicators are clear and accurate and uniform throughout the country. (In fact pretty uniform throughout Europe!)

We are often reminded by Railtrack of their station regeneration programme, but in how many cases is there a real

improvement for passengers? Too often improvement is simply a euphemism for more retail outlets and little TV screens providing departure information which is in many cases impossible to see under some lighting conditions and have different layouts for each train operator. Often no information is showing, or even wrong information. German stations are not short of retail outlets either (for example the range of bars and restaurants on Cologne station is mind-boggling), but it is the problems of rail passengers which have obviously been chiefly addressed.

Our train operators frequently stress the many refurbished trains being brought into service: but in how many cases does it seem just window dressing?

Seats are often just as uncomfortable and cramped, but with new seat coverings and different colour labelling. I was on a refurbished Virgin train a month

or so ago, but the interior electric doors still did not work, and neither did the air conditioning in the greater part of the train. When I complained to the guard he said he hadn't been in that end of the train!

And surely the first thing to have been refurbished, should have been the disgraceful doors on our inter-city stock requiring passengers to lean out of the window to get out. I have not been on a train overseas for years, that does not have some form of automatic door operation, no matter what class or gauge of train it has been.

Often there seems to be a triumph of form over substance on our railways.

All refurbishment should at least include more spacious and comfortable seating, air conditioning, automatic doors and a better ride. To get people out of cars, the trains must be at least as comfortable as their own vehicles, and in many cases they are not.

Thameslink 2000? – maybe in 2006

The long-delayed £800 million Thameslink 2000 scheme has come a step nearer. A public inquiry which will take at least two years is likely to be announced this month. The scheme will bring King's Lynn (Norfolk) and Peterborough (Cambs) into the Thameslink network, along with Littlehampton (West Sussex) and Eastbourne (East Sussex). The scheme includes a £25 million new station at King's Cross, £50 million alterations at Farringdon, a £90 million over-the-river station at Blackfriars, a £30 million viaduct at Borough Market, £130 million of new tracks and station works at London Bridge, a £40 million dive-under at Bermondsey and £200 million worth of new signalling.

Cycle by rail

The national cyclists organisation, the CTC, has produced an excellent eight-page briefing document on Taking A Cycle By Train. If the railways got their act together of course, the briefing paper would be no more than one-page. However, each train operator has its own set of rules, regulations and charges. A suitable case for the Strategic Railway Authority and the Integrated Transport Commission. The CTC has also produced a three-page briefing document on how to complain when you have problems with train operators. RDS has formally congratulated the CTC on drawing up a policy statement dealing with bikes on trains. CTC: 01483 417217

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