



February 2023

### Welcome to the Rail User Express

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The new Rail Minister Huw Merriman MP told the Transport Select Committee that rail strikes cost the industry £25m/day on weekdays, and £15m/day at weekends - between June and Christmas the wider UK economy had lost £700m. Conversely however, that is the scale of the dividend if the railway could be expanded to realise its full potential. How to make that happen is the theme of the Rf Annual Conference in Leeds on 30 March (details below).

Roger Smith

*We start with news from groups around Great Britain. All contributions are gratefully received.*

### Friends of the Far North Line

Rural journeys in Scotland often take as long as those on Intercity routes, so the seating on any new rolling stock needs to be equally comfortable. It should also align with panoramic windows to attract tourist traffic. The Stadler Class 755 stock used on rural routes in Greater Anglia is an excellent example.

A former Class 314 electric train has run successfully on hydrogen at the Boness Heritage Railway. Wick – Thurso has been proposed for main line testing. However, hydrogen is much less fuel-efficient than diesel or battery and requires complex, novel fuelling arrangements. Nor can the hydrogen tank be in a passenger compartment, but adding a third car to maintain the capacity of a two-car unit could have major issues for sidings, depots, loops etc.

Hitrans has engaged consultants Aecon to investigate the feasibility of reopening Evanton station between Dingwall and Alness.

The plan to restart the transport of timber from the Flow Country to Inverness by rail has stalled for lack of suitable wagons. Nor is there any sign yet of a rail siding into the West Fraser (formerly Norbord) factory at Morayhill, although the double track and signalling through the new station at Inverness Airport provides for this. The station itself opened on 3 February.

### Friends of the West Highland Lines

In an article in West Highland News, FWHL Committee Member and Chairman of the Scottish Association for Public Transport John McCormick sets out an Action Plan for the WHL.

Rail usage has collapsed in the wake of Covid and rail strikes, so now is the time to start putting together an ambitious recovery plan; there is a growing appetite for quality rail travel on scenic routes to reach tourist destinations. The Jacobite has shown how a well-marketed train through the dramatic West Highland countryside can attract premium rate custom.

ScotRail is planning to introduce the Highland Explorer Class 153 units on the Glasgow – Fort William/Mallaig route. At present they only work two services on the Oban line. Platform extensions to lengthen trains from six to seven coaches south of Crianlarich, and from four to five north and west of the junction, would allow 153s to operate more services.

ScotRail has partnered with Brompton Bicycle to offer its customers in Inverness Elgin and Oban 24 hours free bike hire. Active Travel Manager Andrew Marshall-Roberts commented “We know that journeys don’t start and end at the train station...Our partnership with Brompton Bike Hire will allow more people to explore the best that scenic Scotland has to offer while encouraging an active lifestyle.”

### **Levenmouth Rail Campaign**

The issue of blocked crossings, especially at Doubledykes, remains an injustice. However, there is much else to pursue in terms of active travel links, maximising the impact of the railway, and issues such as station facilities, timetable and fares.

Work has started on the platform foundations at Cameron Bridge. As well as connecting the local communities to the rail network, with 125 parking spaces, the station will also serve the wider area as a ‘park and ride’ facility. A planning application submitted last October is still outstanding, but permitted development rights and ‘prior approval’ enable work to progress within the confines of the railway corridor.

### **Ribble Valley Rail**

Since it was reopened in 1994, the Blackburn to Clitheroe line has gone from strength to strength. A group of East Lancashire councils have commissioned Northern Trains to assess future demand and scope improvements to rail services including Clitheroe – Blackburn – Manchester – Rochdale, and options to develop services north of Clitheroe to Hellifield and beyond. A Restoring Your Railway (RYR) bid for this was referred back for possible agreement and funding at a local level. If progressed, it would unlock an existing rail route from Clitheroe and the Ribble Valley through to North Yorkshire and potentially beyond.

### **Support The Oldham Rochdale Manchester lines**

It’s reported that Northern’s Dales Rail service from Blackpool North to Carlisle via Settle will not be running this summer. This will leave Clitheroe to Hellifield without a passenger service.

The scheme to reinstate the Bury to Rochdale line via Heywood was successful in the first round of RYR funding, but will not go ahead due to "cost and wider capacity challenges". Rochdale MP Tony Lloyd commented: "Rochdale to Manchester services provide transport to the city centre, but not the kind of connections we need to get around the city region, and in particular from Rochdale and Heywood to Bury."

The ticket machine at Brighouse offers a Hadrian’s Wall Rover, a Tyne and Wear Rover and even an Isle of Wight Steam Rover - but not a West Yorkshire Day Rover! Typing in “Metro” brings up a selection of Manchester Metrolink add-ons but still not the local Rover. If ticket offices close, how will passengers obtain it except from the guard – after boarding the train without a ticket, and thus liable to a Penalty Fare!

## **Friends of the Barton Line**

The Barton line service has been quite good, and EMR is clearly going the extra mile to minimise disruption. At Barrow Haven a 5mph temporary speed restriction has been imposed because new fencing had reduced the sight lines. Engineers were reviewing options such as removing the fencing or installing lights for road traffic. A lorry driver cautioned by BTP for crossing in front of a train said in his defence that he thought it was a disused heritage line.

Government levelling-up funding has been approved for work to improve Barton transport interchange, including real-time passenger information, covered cycle parking with a charging point, and 31 new car park spaces with two electric vehicle charging points. At Cleethorpes, re-instating the old Platform 5 – now renumbered as Platform 4 – was progressing, and it should be available for passenger use towards the end of the year. Sand on the track at Platform 6 is being cleared to enable access for track-relaying machinery.

Unfortunately, due to difficulties in booking a venue, the eagerly anticipated meeting with Pete Myers planned for 10 February is having to be rearranged.

## **Chesham & District Transport Users' Group**

Service failures have been compounded by a lack of announcements and information generally. A train that failed at Chalfont & Latimer late in the evening of 2 January was diverted onto the Chesham branch where it then failed in Chesham station, blocking all the following morning's services.

TfL will be asked about the broken down lifts at Amersham and Harrow on the Hill, as both were installed relatively recently as part of the SFA programme. Ramps for the disabled at Chesham Station are often unavailable, said to be due to lack of staff.

## **Tarka Rail Association**

In a debate on the RYR fund, North Devon MP Selaine Saxby raised the case to restore the rail link to Bideford and upgrade the Tarka Line. The Rail Minister responded that he "wanted to talk with her to find out what more we can do."

And in [evidence](#) to the House of Commons Transport Committee's session on Rural Connectivity, GWR MD Mark Hopwood CBE specifically referred to his visit to Barnstaple the previous month. He drew attention to the Victorian signalling system and crew-operated Eggesford level crossing that contributed to the unacceptably long journey times. Also in January, the installation of Rf-funded banners at Crediton and Eggesford stations like the one Mark unveiled at Barnstaple had attracted publicity in the Crediton Courier and social media outlets.

## **Avocet Line Rail Users Group**

The corridor between Exeter St Davids and Central is extremely busy and easily disrupted. If every train is on time, the timetables work well, but late running services, train failures and issues with faulty track/signals occur all too often. At St Davids, late running Tarka, Okehampton, SWR and southbound CrossCountry services often block Paignton to Exmouth trains from gaining timely access to Platform 1.

At the ALRUG AGM in October, Matt Barnes, Head of Strategic Development said that GWR was trying to grow in the South West; he claimed it had 'better services than ever'. Marsh Barton station is due to open in the spring of 2023, Edginswell and Cullompton are being worked on with development funding in place, and Okehampton usage is surpassing expectations. The case for re-opening the Tavistock to Bere Alston line is being progressed, as is that for a new and an extended loop to enable a half-hourly service to Axminster.

In 2014, an ALRUG study, Station Standards for the Avocet Line, listed aspirations for small stations. An audit identified the improvements needed to meet those standards, and a prioritised “shopping list” was agreed with the rail industry. The benefit of this became clear when various funding sources became available – often at short notice. In 2022, a new audit sought to discover what has or has not yet been achieved. Every Avocet Line station now has real-time running information, either in the form of a next train indicator, or a help point with an updating screen, although the latter are often out of action. Polsloe Bridge and St James’ Park have seen much improvement, but there is more to be done at each – both stations are growing rapidly.

## RAILFUTURE

*Rf welcomes new members, both individual and groups: the more we are, the more weight to its campaigns. Join [here](#): from the “Membership Types” menu top right, select either the appropriate category of individual or, to affiliate, select “RUG or similar”. Read the latest from Rf on [News and views](#), [Press releases](#), [Railfuture in the news](#), and [Consultation responses](#).*

## NEWS

In the [George Bradshaw address](#) to the Institute of Civil Engineers on 7 February, Transport Secretary The Rt Hon Mark Harper MP outlined Government plans to modernise the rail industry. Rf has given it a cautious welcome in a [briefing paper](#), and a [press release](#).

As a guiding mind to coordinate the network, GBR will be responsible for track and train, as well as revenue and cost. Passengers need reliable services, comfortable journeys, and accessible stations, but their main concern was around ticketing, so:

- Pay-As-You-Go ticketing will be completed this year at 52 more stations across the south-east served by Chiltern, London Northwestern, and C2C
- Single leg pricing will be trialled on more of the LNER network, with a view to extending it further
- Flexible single fares will be reduced to half the cost of the equivalent return, giving passengers more flexibility and better value.

A Strategic Freight Unit will be tasked with realising rail freight’s untapped potential for green growth.

The [Rf Annual Conference](#) in Leeds on 30 March, Turning Point for the Railway, will explore how the railway and its structure need to evolve to satisfy all its customers. Planned sessions include:

- Is the railway working for passengers? – by Rf
- Making better use of the railway for freight – by Rail Freight Group
- The value of new lines and stations – by the University of Leeds
- Making the railway more accessible and inclusive for all – by the GBR Transition Team.
- Making trains more family friendly – by Family Friendly Trains
- Engaging young people in the railway – by Community Rail
- Encouraging more women to work in rail – by Women in Rail.

The conference will go ahead even if a strike is called on the day or the day before, so [book here](#).

William Whiting, once a Rf Director and Chair of its West Midlands branch, was a key organiser of the conference. Tragically, William passed away on 29 January following a cardiac arrest. The conference will be dedicated to his memory.

A blue plaque has been unveiled at Ashburys station in Greater Manchester to honour Paul Abell, a former Rf Vice-President.

## RAILFUTURE YORKSHIRE

It has not been a good quarter for train passengers, or for the train operating companies. TransPennine Express has seen massive cancellations, partly related to staff declining to work overtime on rest days. Many TPE trains have been taken out of the timetable the night before – so they don't show in the official "cancelled" figures. It's time either DfT or ORR sorted out this statistical anomaly (see below).

There is a worry that the Sunak Government has yet to agree to build Northern Powerhouse Rail in full. The Chancellor's Autumn Statement kept the Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) intact, but most rail campaigners in the North consider it to be a flawed document, designed for what it will cost rather than as a 10 to 15 year investment with all the benefits that will bring.

The appointments of Hugh Merriman as Minister of State for Rail and HS2, and of Iain Stewart to replace him as Chairman of the Transport Select Committee, are most welcome. The Committee called for the IRP to be revisited. We can only hope that the Prime Minister, Chancellor and Transport Secretary let Merriman take a positive approach both to current rail performance and its future development.

## COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK

Community Rail Week returns from 22-28 May. CRN is in discussion with Rail Delivery Group about using this year's campaign to highlight initiatives that engage and empower communities, with the focus on the benefits of the inspiring projects that its members deliver.

## TRANSPORT FOCUS

Reliability underpins satisfaction with rail as it does with all ways of getting around. Passengers want their journey to take how long they expect, so both Government and the transport industry need to focus on it.

Rolling stock leasing company Porterbrook asked Transport Focus to find out what passengers want to see changed on Turbostar fleets in the Midlands. TF asked about seating, interior decor, flooring, space for bikes, wheelchairs and buggies, information, security and charging points. Passengers would like overhead control of lighting and ventilation, as well as space above their seats to keep luggage nearby. Covid has also reset their expectations on cleaning, with an increased focus on hygiene and toilets.

## CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER TRANSPORT

RUX congratulates CBT on reaching its 50th anniversary on 6 February. Founded as Transport 2000 to campaign against plans to halve the British Rail network, it expanded its remit to fight road building plans, including one for three 'ringways' in London, and another to demolish much of York's historic centre. Thankfully, both these schemes were eventually scrapped.

*...and now the rest of the news...*

On 30 January, ORR called on the seven remaining train operators to implement the system that notifies passengers when their booked trains are cancelled or timetables change. It has also told industry to stop the inappropriate use of 'p-coding': where trains are 'pre-cancelled' before they are included in the following day's timetable, so they don't appear in the official statistics.

ORR monitors developments and decisions on the new East Coast Main Line timetable through its observation of the Event Steering Group led by NR. The implementation of the significant change options developed within the Group and their associated benefits are dependent on 'funder service specification decisions'. ORR understands that NR is waiting on confirmation of those specification decisions, which it recognised as being important to effective implementation in its [2022 NR Annual Assessment](#)

Neil Holm has been appointed MD of the Transpennine Route Upgrade. Between 11 March and 5 April, the TRU will completely remodel the tracks on the approach to Stalybridge station, install over a mile of new track and 23 signals, upgrade 13 crossovers, and fit overhead line equipment.

Twenty MPs for the East of England have called on the Prime Minister to help "realise its full potential". Peter Aldous MP, co-chairman of their All Party Parliamentary group (APPG), said that long-awaited work on upgrading rail junctions at Ely and Haughley needed to go ahead. Giles Watling MP told a debate that a 90min train journey to London from his Clacton constituency was unacceptable.

NR has contracted to modify the Great Eastern Line track and signalling prior to construction of Beaulieu Park station at Chelmsford. A central loop line will enable fast through trains to pass stopping services. The station is expected to open to passenger services by the end of 2025.

The train service on the Marston Vale Line between Bedford and Bletchley has been suspended since Vivarail went into administration. Central Bedfordshire councillor John Baker said the replacement bus service was "too slow; journeys were a lot harder for children and commuters." London Northwestern Railway is seeking a solution.

A bid to move Watford's London Underground and Overground stations into Zone 6 from Zones 7 and 8 and a "special fares" area comes ahead of a plan, due to start on 29 August, to charge drivers of the most polluting vehicles £12.50 per day if they cross the Greater London boundary. The fare for a journey from Watford Junction to Euston would come down from £11.20 to £5.50. Councillors fear they are "subsidising" Londoners after TfL backed out of a project to extend the Metropolitan line from Croxley into Watford Junction in 2018.

Eurostar has had to cap the number of passengers on its trains to 70% of their capacity, and cut UK - Paris services from 18/day in 2019 to 14 because new boarding conditions between the UK and EU are causing bottlenecks at its terminals.

By working around the clock to repair the huge landslip at Hook in Hampshire, NR aims to reopen all four lines between Woking and Basingstoke by 24 February.

NR Wales and Western region has contracted for an eight-year, £2bn programme of works. As well as maintenance of the railway infrastructure, and plant at the Severn Tunnel pumping station, the work provides for major overhead line interventions, and new stations at North Filton and Henbury in Bristol, Wellington and Cullompton in Devon, and Charfield in South Gloucestershire.

Following the approval last November of a development consent order to reopen the Portishead - Bristol line with stations in Pill and Portishead, NR has appointed VolkerFitzpatrick as the primary contractor. Over the next 12-18 months, the project, which is part of the MetroWest programme, will complete the detailed design phase, as well as ground and ecology surveys and enabling works, while preparing the full business case for decision makers.

The Government's levelling-up fund will help create a direct train service linking four of Cornwall's largest urban areas: Newquay, St Austell, Truro, and Falmouth. A new Okehampton Parkway station will serve as a transport hub for West Devon, while Crossrail Cardiff will be a new line between Cardiff Bay and Cardiff Central, with several new stations.

Varamis Rail has launched a zero carbon express parcels service between Scotland and the Midlands, primarily aimed at next-day delivery of consumer goods. Industry partner Eversholt Rail has converted a number of 4-car electric passenger trains to carry freight, while NR provided the necessary operating licences, contracts and train paths for the service to operate.

A Watford man had to pay £935.30 after evading a £6.30 train fare. Convicted of entering the TfL network without a valid ticket, he was fined £220 in addition to £6.30 in compensation, a £34 victim services surcharge, and costs of £675.



. . . , *and finally*

Two 'lost' dining saloons that formed part of the 'Boat Train Express' and are believed to have carried Titanic passengers to the dockside in Southampton for its doomed maiden voyage have been discovered languishing in a yard after 110 years. The British Titanic Society has set up a [charitable trust](#) with the aim of raising £500,000 to return them to their former glory.

The Commonwealth Games' Raging Bull is to find a permanent home at Birmingham New Street station. Originally constructed of mechanised aluminium tubing, it is being redesigned as a static artwork. Then the huge task of bringing the Bull home can be set in motion, with the aim of a summer 2023 arrival.

## CONSULTATIONS

- Warwickshire County Council: [Rugby Parkway Station](#), closes 20 February
- South East APPG: [Call for Evidence on Transport Infrastructure](#), closes 24 February
- Gloucestershire County Council: [Reducing Transport Carbon Emissions, Reaching Net Zero by 2045](#), close 28 February
- Welsh Government: [Just Transition to Net Zero Wales](#), closes 15 March
- Commons Transport Committee: [Call for Evidence on Accessible Transport: Legal Obligations](#), closes 20 March.

Please advise [Roger Blake](#) of any other consultation, eg that of a local transport authority.

## EVENTS

Please keep your events coming, and update websites with any changes as soon as they are made. Stand-alone lists are helpful, as newsletters may be discarded. Also copy [Roger Blake](#), who maintains lists of [Events](#) and [Rail Dates](#) on the Rf website.

Blob colour indicates the type of event:

- Rf events (RUGs are cordially invited).
- National & regional rail events.
- Local Group events.

## February

- Saturday 18. Rf London South East, Kent Division, **Online**, 1400.
- Saturday 25. English Regional Transport Association, The High Cross, 105 High Street, **Leicester** LE1 4JB, 1400
- Saturday 25. Rf Yorkshire, Clements Hall, Nunthorpe Road, **York**, YO23 1BW, 1300.
- Saturday 25. Rf East Anglia AGM, Friends Meeting House, St. John's Street, **Bury St. Edmunds**, Suffolk, IP33 1SJ, 14.00 (Also 17 June, Ipswich).
- Tuesday 28. Levenmouth Rail Campaign, Fife Renewables Innovation Centre, Ajax Way, **Methil**, Leven, KY8 3RS and **Online**, 1830 (Also the last Tuesday of every month).

## March

- Thursday 2. Rf London & South East, Sussex & Coastway division. **Bishopstone** Station, 1800. (Also the first Thursday of every month).
- Saturday 4. East Suffolk Transport Association, St Mary's Church, **Halesworth**, 1400 (Also 20 May (AGM), Oulton Broad).

- Tuesday 7. STORM, Blue Pits Inn, 842 Manchester Road, **Castleton**, OL11 2SP, 1400  
(Also the second Tuesday of each month).
- Wednesday 8. Rf London South East, Eastern Division, **Online**, 1900.
- Saturday 11. English Regional Transport Association, Methodist Church, Northampton Road, **Market Harborough**, LE16 9HE, 1400.
- Monday 13. Ribble Valley Rail, New Inn, Parson Lane, **Clitheroe**, BB7 2JN, 1900 (Also the second Monday of every month).
- Monday 13. SELRAP AGM, Municipal Hall, **Colne**, BB8 0BP, 1900.
- Thursday 30. Rf Annual Conference, St Georges Centre, 60 Great George Street, **Leeds**, LS1 3DL.

#### **Further Ahead**

- 22 April. Rf London South East Branch, Wesley's Chapel, 49 City Road, **London** EC1Y 1AU.
- 28 April. Friends of the West Highland Lines AGM, Great Western Hotel, **Oban**, 1200.
- 23 June. Friends of the Far North Line AGM, Timespan, Helmsdale, 1030.

Disclaimer: unless otherwise stated, views expressed are those of the contributor, and not necessarily shared by Rf.

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