

BRING BACK OUR TRACKS

The rail cuts begun in the 1950s and 1960s removed many towns and villages from the network. Large numbers of people suffered inconvenience and difficulties. Road congestion and pollution increased as people took to the car. Since the early 1970s, however, over 250 stations have been opened, re-opened or relocated to meet changing needs. Over 150 miles of freight-only lines have been restored to the passenger network and several miles of new track built. Much of this has been achieved on the initiative of local authorities and rail users' groups. The immensely successful Robin Hood line from Nottingham to Mansfield, reopened in stages 1993-95, is an example of what can be done.

Yet the present network still has huge, often strategic gaps. Many areas of fast growing population still lack good rail access. The Railway Development Society believes that some of the gaps can be filled, and some important towns brought back on to the network, by rebuilding old routes and, in a few cases, providing entirely new stretches of line. In 1993 RDS set out a programme of 10 routes which should be rebuilt. We now report on developments, and suggest further routes which should be considered for safeguarding of their trackbeds as a first step to restoration. Rebuilding the missing links and feeder lines in this leaflet, involving up to 215 miles of new and restored track, would immensely improve the network. Finance should be provided by local authorities, central government and other sources. The costs are a minute fraction of what is currently spent on roads. Road building cannot relieve congestion.

This leaflet deals with routes where track is to be built, rather than with the restoration of passenger services on freight-only routes. The completion of a route to the north of London from Braintree through Stansted, Cambridge and Bedford to Oxford is included, to match the southern route from Reading to Ashford. Developments within 30 miles of London are excluded.



Restoring Missing Links in the Network

1. Bedford - Sandy / Huntingdon - St. Ives - Fen Drayton for Oxford to Cambridge

Reinstating 8½ miles of track between Bedford and Sandy, and 7 miles between Huntingdon and Fen Drayton would make it possible for many new services to run cross country between East Anglia and the West. The reinstated track would link up with the Oxford - Bicester and Bletchley - Bedford passenger lines, the Bicester - Bletchley freight line, and the recently closed Fen Drayton - Cambridge freight line. Trains could thus run Oxford - Bicester - Bedford - Sandy - Huntingdon - Cambridge, providing an east-west route which avoids London. At present, no such route exists for 70 miles north of the capital. The new route would thus be of great strategic importance. Another option is for the route east of Sandy to run Sandy-Letchworth-Cambridge. Both options have been studied by consultants appointed by a consortium of local authorities in 1995.

Between Bedford and Sandy, a bridge will be required on the Bedford Southern Bypass to carry the bypass over the trackbed. Minor realignments to the original route will be needed for a few hundred yards, notably at Blunham (near Sandy) and at Sandy. Between Huntingdon and St. Ives, some new construction will be needed, but the route is 10 miles shorter than via Letchworth, and St. Ives (population 14,480) would regain its rail services.

The east-west route would join areas of high population growth including Milton Keynes and East Anglia. Considerable freight could be carried, thereby relieving traffic on east - west roads such as the A422 and A428. New local services could relieve the severe traffic congestion around Bedford, and around Cambridge with the reopening via St. Ives. Other new services would be possible, for example, a new Cambridge - Peterborough route via Huntingdon, 10 miles shorter than via Ely.

2. Northampton - Midland Main Line

Northampton (population 186,000) is one of England's largest towns. Once six railway routes radiated from it. Now it is only possible to travel north-west or south-east. Travel to the East Midlands or Peterborough requires a prolonged detour via Nuneaton or via Bletchley and Bedford.

Reinstating a connection between Northampton and the Midland main line would provide a very necessary strategic link. Several possibilities exist: restoring the Northampton - Market Harborough line, the Northampton - Bedford line or the Northampton - Wellingborough line. RDS favours re-opening the shortest, Northampton - Wellingborough, by relaying 12 miles of track. The first two miles of the route from Northampton exist as a freight siding. At the Wellingborough end some new construction will be required to negotiate the A45 dual carriageway, and a river bridge will need replacing. The line could then take a new route under and to the east of the Midland main line using the old Northampton route to Oundle and curving northwards to Wellingborough Station.

The new route would link over 100,000 people in the Kettering/Wellingborough area to their county town. Journeys to Peterborough via Corby would be possible with a re-opened freight-only line from Kettering to Manton Junction (west of Peterborough) and could be further shortened by a direct link from south of Manton to the Peterborough - Stamford line.

3. Braintree - Stansted

RDS remained neutral on the need for development at Stansted Airport, but argued that if it went ahead, the new air terminal should be served by rail. At the request of the British Airports Authority, evidence was put forward by the RDS at the official enquiry.

In March 1991, the new rail link was opened, connecting Stansted Airport via a triangular junction to the main line between Cambridge and Bishop's Stortford. A strategic missing link between Cambridgeshire and parts of Essex can now be provided by extending the Stansted line eastwards to join up with the Braintree - Witham line. This would involve reinstating 14 miles of track on the Bishop's Stortford - Braintree line. This closed to passengers in 1952, depriving Great Dunmow (population 5,705) of its passenger services. A more northerly alignment is also possible, running along the A120 corridor. This possibility is under threat from a new road.

A short chord should also be built north of Witham enabling trains to travel from Braintree to Colchester without reversing. The new route will give access to the airport from Suffolk and eastern Essex and reduce local traffic congestion around the airport. New through services from the Colchester area will be possible. The Cambridge - Colchester journey, now 73 miles via Bury St. Edmunds and Ipswich, will be reduced by 17 miles. Railtrack have publicly supported this proposal, and feasibility studies have been carried out by Essex County Council.

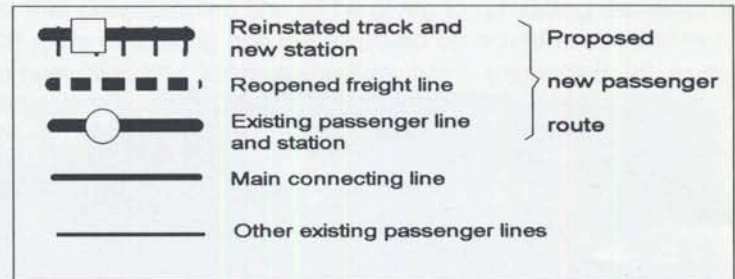
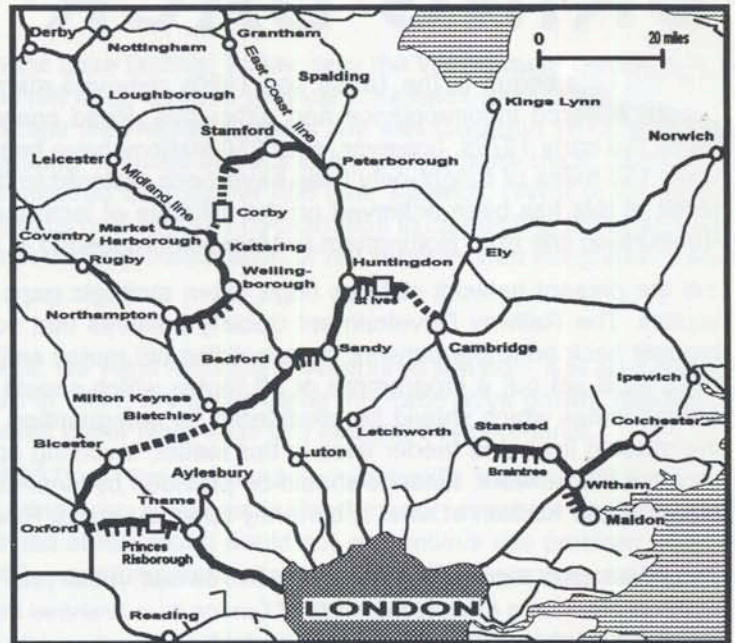
4. Oxford - Princes Risborough

Reopening the 21 mile line from Oxford to Princes Risborough would restore trains to Thame (pop 11,000) and Wheatley, and make many more Oxfordshire journeys possible. Services could run to High Wycombe or Aylesbury (29 and 28 miles away). Obstacles to reopening are in general minor. The track is intact out to Cowley; a new station site would be required at Wheatley. (A tunnel between Horspath and Wheatley needs excavating). New construction will be required to negotiate the M40/A40 interchange. From there to Thame the trackbed is essentially intact; between Thame and Princes Risborough the line has just been lifted except for the last mile.

5. Walsall - Brownhills

Walsall is the 13th largest town in the Country, with a population of 264,000. Brownhills, just 5 miles away, is one of the largest towns without passenger rail services. The track between them was lifted in 1985. There are no physical impediments to re-opening. A bridge at Brownhills station site has been replaced by a roundabout with space underneath for double track with the support of the passenger transport authority; all other bridges are in position.

Reinstatement of the track would make it possible to run new cross-country routes via Wolverhampton - Walsall - Brownhills - Lichfield - Burton upon Trent - Derby. Trains would use existing freight lines from Wolverhampton to Walsall (used already for diversions) and from Brownhills to Lichfield. The new routes would serve 1.2 million people, more than served by the recently successfully restored Coventry - Leicester - Nottingham route.



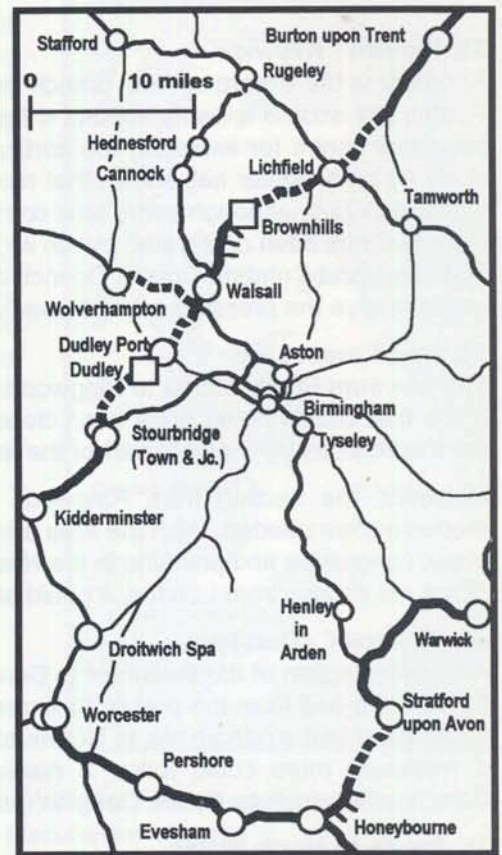
New local services would also be possible, from Brownhills to Stourbridge Junction via Walsall and Dudley, itself isolated from the network with a population of 187,000, using the former freight-only line from Walsall to Stourbridge Junction. This reopening is under discussion. Reopening Walsall to Brownhills would also shorten freight journeys from Walsall to Lichfield, which at present run via Sutton Park, by 15 miles. Walsall - Brownhills is thus a valuable strategic link.

6. Stratford - Honeybourne

Stratford-upon-Avon is an important centre for business and popular with foreign tourists. It is poorly served by rail, with no southern or western links. Journeys to London and the south require travelling in a loop first north and then east to Leamington Spa. Journeys to places immediately south or west of Stratford are impossible. The missing strategic link could be provided by re-opening the Stratford - Honeybourne line, closed to passengers in 1968.

This would require laying 6 miles of track south of Stratford station, to connect with the 2 mile Long Marston - Honeybourne freight line. Some realignment of the original route would be necessary around an industrial estate near Long Marston and notably for ¼ mile in Stratford where the original track-bed is occupied by a relief road. Although there are plans to extend the relief road northwards along the track-bed towards the station, the re-opening has strong local support and objections to the road scheme have been submitted to an enquiry by local action groups. The Long Marston line is expected to close in 1997; a local railway group are planning to run steam services on it as part of the campaign. Consultants are studying the reopening.

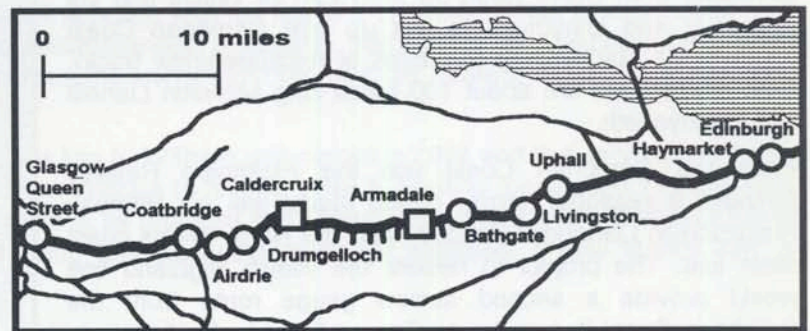
With the reopened route, journeys to Oxford and Thames Valley would be 14 miles shorter. New local journeys to stations in the Cotswolds would become possible. Traffic congestion at Stratford would be greatly eased; a station could be opened on the new line adjoining Stratford Racecourse. The new link would also make it possible to travel west of Stratford to the West of England and South Wales via Worcester, itself then only 28 miles away.



7. Bathgate - Drumgelloch (Airdrie)

Bathgate (pop 10,852) regained rail services in 1986 when the freight-only route to Edinburgh was reopened to passengers. The reopening has been a huge success.

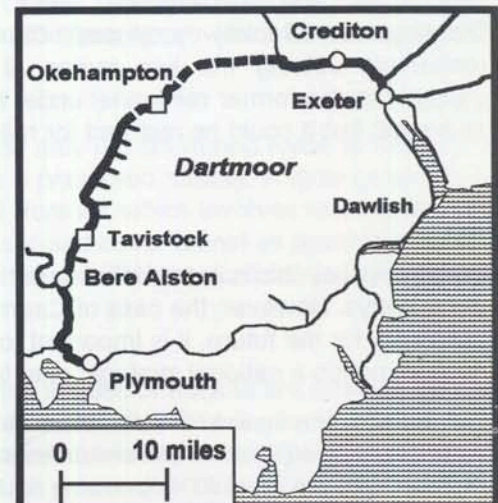
Reinstating 12 miles of track westward to Drumgelloch would give access to Glasgow via Airdrie. Eastern Glasgow, Coatbridge and Airdrie (pop 37,000) would gain a direct link to Edinburgh. The trackbed is intact, being in use as a cycle path. Engineering work will be required at Bathgate as the station is on a dead end, if trains are not to reverse.



8. Bere Alston - Tavistock - Okehampton

Relaying 5½ miles of track on the derelict Bere Alston - Tavistock route, from the Plymouth - Bere Alston - Gunnislake branch, would restore services to Tavistock (population 10,149) thus providing an important commuter route into Plymouth. This would ease the severe traffic congestion in Plymouth and on the busy A386 Plymouth to Tavistock road. Whilst the old Tavistock station site has been built on, a new site has been identified. The reopening is part of Devon transport policy. Also included is a proposal for the freight line to Meldon Quarry to be reopened to passengers as far as Okehampton.

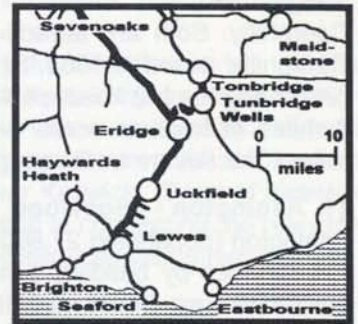
Reinstating a further 15 miles of line beyond Tavistock to Okehampton would provide a useful inland diversionary route between Plymouth and Exeter. The existing coast line via Dawlish is vulnerable at times in the winter. Restoring services to Okehampton and Tavistock would also provide an important social service in an area isolated from the rail network and greatly improve access to the Dartmoor National Park. There were once thirty stations in or within a mile of Dartmoor.



9. Tunbridge Wells - Eridge / Uckfield - Lewes

Reinstating the 7 mile Uckfield - Lewes line would provide a very useful link to the Brighton conurbation and provide an alternative route between London and Brighton and the South Coast. Taken together with Tunbridge Wells to Eridge, a line already being reopened by a local preservation society, an important strategic route between western Kent and East Sussex would be created. It would be possible to travel from Brighton to mid-Kent via Tunbridge Wells, changing at Tonbridge for Maidstone and the Medway Towns. The new route would provide access to the South Coast from Uckfield (population 11,820) and towns such as Oxted (11,000).

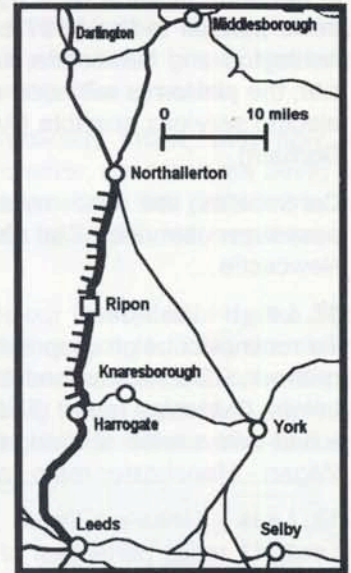
The Uckfield-Lewes line was lifted in 1969; the track bed has been protected from development. In Tunbridge Wells it would be necessary to reinstate the 1 mile of track between the Central and former West stations. This would require the line to run alongside the Sainsbury's supermarket, built on ex-railway land at Tunbridge Wells West. A Railtrack investigation has shown it is still possible to reinstate a railway across the site. East Sussex and Kent County Councils maintain a real interest in these reopenings.



10. Harrogate - Ripon - Northallerton

Reinstating the 25 mile line between Harrogate and Northallerton would enable the cathedral city of Ripon, (population 14,605) to regain its rail services, and provide an important direct link from Lancashire and West Yorkshire to the North-East.

Some realignments of the original route will be required as parts of the original trackbed are being used for road schemes, notably a one mile relief road for Ripon, which was opened in 1996. However, even with the road schemes taking place, the railway could run alongside, and a local society has been formed to press the case for the re-opening. Services would benefit both commuters and tourists as well as act as a cut-off for journeys to the North. Journeys from Leeds to Northallerton (and points north) would be reduced by 13 miles (43 miles compared with the present 56 miles via York). Journeys from Harrogate to Northallerton would be reduced by 26 miles compared with 51 miles at present via York.



Feeder Lines to Reconnect Communities to the Network

11. St. Andrews - Leuchars

St. Andrews is a university town and an important golfing and tourist centre with a cathedral and a castle. It is one of the larger Scottish towns to be isolated from the network, with a population of 13,970 and a large number of students. No major engineering problems exist with reopening the 5 mile line to the main line at Leuchars, although a bridge over the river Eden needs to be replaced. Two possible station sites have been identified in the town from where trains could run to Dundee or Edinburgh. A local action group, Starlink, are putting the case for a feasibility study by the new unitary council. Scotrail have shown an interest.

12. Edinburgh - Galashiels

The Borders have been rail-less since the Waverley route between Edinburgh and Carlisle was closed in 1969. The 27 mile section from Edinburgh to Galashiels should be reopened to serve as a railhead. This would restore services to Galashiels (13,300) and to commuter towns such as Dalkeith (11,858) and Bonnyrigg (14,440). The trackbed has been reserved for rail use to the Regional boundary (south of Gorebridge) in the local authority structure plan at the suggestion of RDS. A new station site will be required in Galashiels and the A720 Edinburgh bypass must be bridged.

13. Bangor - Caernarfon

Caernarfon lies 8½ miles south-west of Bangor, the nearest railhead. Caernarfon, population 10,000, is the administrative centre of the County and the District. Caernarfon Castle with its environs is a major tourist attraction drawing visitors from across the world. In 1989 RDS put forward plans to re-connect Caernarfon to the rail network, pointing out that the link would ease the severe traffic problems around Caernarfon and help revitalise the local economy.

Since then, however, reinstatement has become far more difficult. Not only has a superstore been built on the Caernarfon station site, but the cutting leading to Treborth Tunnel has been filled in for an industrial estate, and part of the trackbed has been taken over by the Felinheli (Port Dinorwic) bypass. Although these developments will have increased the cost of reopening RDS recommends that the project be pursued.

14. Porth - Maerdy

The disused 6½ mile valley line from Porth to Maerdy runs through one of the most deprived areas in Britain. Whilst track is present almost to Maerdy it was last used ten years ago and needs replacing. A new station could be built at Maerdy very close to the houses and the line could serve several communities such as Ferndale and Tylorstown in a densely populated area. Factories are being opened at Maerdy to provide employment and will need railfreight access. RDS are campaigning for the line to be safeguarded as it is threatened by a planned new road.

15. Senghenydd - Caerphilly (Caerffili)

Senghenydd and Abertridwr are two compact towns to the north of Caerphilly. Both are attractive to Cardiff commuters. The line south to Caerphilly closed in 1964. Rhymney Valley district council has a policy of preserving the trackbed, part of which is a cycleway. RDS suggest relaying 3 miles of track to serve Senghenydd and Abertridwr. This would help relieve the severe traffic congestion in Caerphilly.

16. Ashington - Pegswood

Ashington (population 27,800), 18 miles north of Newcastle, can regain its rail services by building a new 2 mile line to Pegswood on the nearby electrified East Coast main line. The new line would run a third of a mile to the north of the A197 Pegswood to Ashington road. It would run across fields parallel to the A197 before curving south to join the freight line to Ashington and Newcastle. Ashington station can be rebuilt on its former site; the platforms will need upgrading. Electrifying the link will make local electric services possible (Ashington - Pegswood - Morpeth - Newcastle - Durham).

Consultants are also evaluating the reopening of freight lines, for passenger services, in the area around Morpeth, Bedlington and Newcastle.

17. Leigh - Walkden

To reconnect Leigh (population 42,627) in Greater Manchester to the rail network, RDS recommend the reinstatement of 4 miles of track on the old Leigh - Tyldesley route. (The trackbed is unimpeded in general except for a half-mile stretch of road, although some bridges will need to be replaced.) Half a mile of new construction to join the Wigan - Manchester main line will give Leigh rail access to Walkden and Manchester Victoria.

18. Leek - Stoke-on-Trent

Leek, 11 miles north-east of Stoke, can be reconnected to the network by restoring just 1 mile of track southwards of Leek. New construction would be required for part of the reinstatement, which would connect at Leekbrook Junction with the currently mothballed freight line to Stoke. This would enable local services to run to Stoke from Leek (population 19,400) and intermediate communities. A new site will need to be found for Leek station as it was demolished in 1973 to make way for an industrial estate.

The reopened line would also connect at Leekbrook Junction with the line to Oakamoor, which a preservation group are working towards reopening. Consultants have recommended reopening from Stoke to Oakamoor for leisure and commuter traffic. Oakamoor is less than 3 miles from the tourist attraction of Alton Towers.

19. Witham - Maldon

Maldon is a popular East Anglian sailing resort; the line to Witham was closed in 1964 and that to Woodham Ferrers in 1939. RDS suggest reinstating 5 miles of track from Witham to restore trains to Maldon (population 11,836). The trackbed is mainly intact although some bridges will need to be replaced and a new junction built north of Witham to lead the line into Witham station. At Maldon, the A414 ring road has obliterated the trackbed; a new station can be built adjoining the road.

20. Guildford - Cranleigh

RDS suggest reinstating the line to Cranleigh (population 12,000), by relaying 6 miles of track. The trackbed is virtually intact with the Downs Link running along the route. The footpath could run alongside the reinstated railway. The reopening has strong local support and is officially supported by Surrey County Council following a study of the route. Consideration should also be given to reinstating the rest of the route to Horsham to provide a useful regional link for the 130,000 population in the Guildford - Cranleigh - Horsham corridor.

21. Shanklin - Ventnor

The Isle of Wight used to have a comprehensive railway network, but now only the shortened Ryde to Shanklin line is left, together with part of the Ryde - Newport branch which is operated as a preserved railway. A local group have been campaigning for the extension of the Ryde - Shanklin line to Wroxall and Ventnor, which involves reinstating 4 miles of track. To get the line through Wroxall consultants have recommended a cut-and-cover tunnel as development as taken place on the trackbed. A new station can then be built at the centre of the village. Trains would run half - hourly through to Ventnor.

22. Bideford - Barnstaple

Bideford (pop 22,998 with Northam) could regain its rail services by relaying 9 miles of track to link with the Barnstaple - Exeter line, so benefiting the local economy and the overall viability of North Devon rail services. Since the first proposals to reopen this line in 1979 the intact trackbed has been incorporated into the Tarka Trail. It is fortunate that the topography is favourable for parallel rail and trail routes, except through a tunnel at Instow, as the route lies in the wide flood plain of the River Taw.



Other Possibilities

23. Penrith - Keswick

At one time there were several branch lines running into the Lake District. Today, only the Windermere branch remains. Further rail access is badly needed if the Lake District is not to be overrun with cars. Keswick (population 5,600) is an important centre for exploring the north of the district. While the Penrith-Keswick line was closed in 1972, a feasibility study by an engineer has shown that reopening by reinstating 18 miles of track is a practical proposition. The trackbed is mainly intact, although some new construction will be required to cross the A66 near Keswick. (West of Keswick, the track-bed has been obliterated by the widened A66.) Railtrack have offered co-operation in connecting the branch to the main line, and Cumbria County Council are funding a further study. Restoration of rail services with integrated bus links would relieve the pressure on local roads.

24. New Forest Line

The line from Brockenhurst to Ringwood once ran to Poole, via West Moors and Wimborne Minster - it is an example of a line that should never have been closed. Since closure in 1964, the towns along the route have grown, and much of the trackbed on the western part of the line has disappeared under new roads and housing developments.

However, the section from Ringwood (population 12,237) to Brockenhurst is practically intact, with only minor reconstruction needed. With the area attracting an increasing amount of cars in the Summer, concerns are being raised about congestion and pollution in the New Forest. A railhead at Ringwood would not only relieve this problem, by giving direct rail access from London, it could also provide an all year-round commuter service to Southampton and beyond.

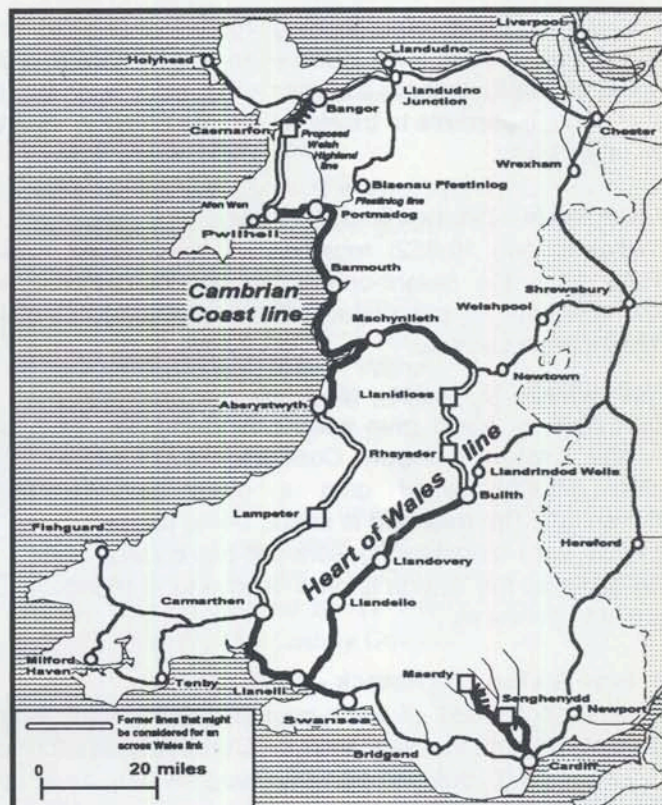
25. Stranraer - Dumfries

A 63 mile section of the Stranraer to Dumfries line was closed in 1965. The present detour via Ayr doubles the distance for trains to and from the port of Stranraer. RDS suggest that consideration should be given to rebuilding the direct line as an important strategic link to Northern Ireland. The old route is winding and the trackbed breached in several places; a reopened route could follow a new straighter alignment. Several local authorities have expressed an interest. Communities such as Castle Douglas (pop 3,640) and Newton Stewart (3,220) could have their rail services restored.

26. South to North Wales

Wales lacks good north-south rail links. There is scope for improved and new services from Cardiff to North Wales via Shrewsbury and from Swansea via the Heart of Wales line, but links into Mid Wales would still be poor. One possibility would be to consider restoration of the Carmarthen to Aberystwyth line (56 miles of reinstated track) or alternatively to rebuild from Builth Road on the Heart of Wales line via Rhayader and Llanidloes to link up with Cambrian Coast services via Machynlleth (33 miles of reinstated/new track). Both alternatives are about 100 miles long between Llanelli and Machynlleth.

From the Cambrian Coast line the Ffestiniog Railway provides a seasonal narrow gauge tourist link via Blaenau Ffestiniog to Llandudno Junction and the North Wales coast main line. The project to restore the Welsh Highland line would provide a second narrow gauge route from the Cambrian Coast line as far as Caernarfon. Ideally, however, fast through running is required to link with the North Wales coast line. This can be provided by reinstating the Afon Wen-Caernarfon line, to connect there with the Railway Development Society proposed Caernarfon to Bangor reopening. Joining the two routes at Caernarfon is the difficulty as the former rail tunnel under the town is now used as a road, but it could be restored for rail use.



VIEW FROM THE GUARD'S VAN

Some may say this is not an ideal time to put forward our proposals with the current reorganisation and privatisation of the railways. However, the case of Caernarfon illustrates that if new and restored routes are to remain a cost effective possibility for the future, it is important to identify the key routes that need to be protected. RDS believe that our railway network needs a national strategic plan for expansion, not dismemberment.

The Railway Development Society, which has issued this leaflet, is the national, independent, non-party, voluntary body for rail users. We campaign for the modernisation and expansion of the rail network for environmental, social and economic reasons. You can find out more about RDS by writing to: The Railway Development Society, 2 Clematis Cottage, Hopton Bank, Cleobury Mortimer. DY14 0HF Tel/Fax 01584 891300