



**A**mong all the argument and counter argument about electrification clearances that has raged in recent months, one figure stood out for me. Not the distance between live wire and platform, or clearance between wire and overbridge, but that the Rail Safety & Standards Board safety risk model estimates a passenger fatality from 25kV electric shock will occur once every 300 years. And that's presumably based on the existing kit that is strung up around the country which nobody (so far!) has suggested should be replaced, rather than equipment erected to the new more restrictive and horrendously expensive standards for no other reason than to reduce the perceived risk even further towards a vanishing point sometime in the next millennium.

Now, here's another figure. Depratment for Transport statistics show that 1,792 people died on our roads last year. That's an average of nearly five people killed today as you read this. Sadly, another five yesterday. And yet another five tomorrow. Worse still, after several years of decline, the number has started to increase again. So five a day and getting worse, not one in 300 years. To save you the maths, that means you are around 543,000 times more likely to be killed on the road tomorrow than electrocuted by contact with an overhead wire on the railway. In the past 10 years not a single passenger has died in a railway accident (yes, I know I am tempting providence). In the same period some 20,000 people have died on our roads. So you are currently about a mere 20,000 times more likely to become a road accident victim tomorrow than if you travel by train instead. How does a civilised society justify that?

As I write, two reports have popped up on my screen. The first is that, sadly, five people have died in just one accident on the M5 after a lorry crashed through the central reservation and collided head-on with traffic travelling in the opposite direction. The second is a report from the Rail Accident Investigation Branch into a fatal collision between a tram and a pedestrian in Sheffield last December. It is a thorough report and makes two recommendations and identifies three learning points. It would be nice to think that, some nine months from now, a similarly thorough official report on that accident on the M5 will appear, explaining why the lorry went out of control, why the central barrier



**Bronte beer: pumps in the Jubilee refreshment rooms at Sowerby Bridge on 30 August 2014.** Paul Bigland

failed, commenting on the relative crashworthiness of cars and HGVs sharing the same space, and making some recommendations to ensure it won't happen again. And, of course, pigs might fly.

Stepping out into the real world for a moment, here in rural North Yorkshire, many people get power to their homes not by underground cable but from unprotected live overhead wires carried on wooden poles at about the same height as a 25kV catenary above rail level. There must be hundreds if not thousands of miles of such 'pole routes' across Britain. Outside my house, and many others, two equally unprotected wires curl down to a transformer that I could reach with an extended (metal!) ladder or pole if I so wished. I don't, but there's nothing much to dissuade me, apart from a small plate halfway up the pole declaring 'Danger of death'. The countryside is not littered with the charred remains of those who have come into contact with these wires, nor as far as I know is there any pressure to mount them any higher or to increase their protection. So why is the railway, which is generally far less accessible, any different?

Next, consider tramways as opposed to busways. Trams, being rail-borne, are subject to both the scrutiny of the Railway Inspectorate and investigation and recommendation by RAIB in the event of an accident or incident. In contrast, buses on guided busways, which cannot swerve and are therefore essentially rubber-tyred trams, have no such oversight, even though they appear to be involved in more accidents. Trams are required to have driver's vigilance devices – the so called 'dead man's handle' – but there

is no equivalent requirement for buses on busways, even though the maximum permitted speed, at 50mph, is identical. There is a markedly different approach to pedestrian access, too. Tramways are required to have clearly marked crossing points and appropriately sited protecting barriers, but it seems that anybody can wander across a busway and, in as much as formal crossing points exist at all, they are not protected.

Clearly, there is a huge and growing gap between what the Office of Rail and Road (surely more correctly the Office of Rail versus Road?) expects of the rail (and tram) industry and that of road users. The overall social and financial cost of a death on the railway is said to be around the same as that for a road death, so to relentlessly pursue the ultimately unattainable holy grail of absolute safety in every part of the rail industry while continuing to accept seemingly without question the mayhem that occurs daily on our roads makes no sense morally, socially or economically.


I am not arguing for a general relaxation of current rules and requirements around the safe operation of railways and tramways, although there are certainly more than a few that deserve a thorough review. Nobody wants a less safe railway. But let us pause. Instead of piling yet more seemingly unnecessary requirements on an already very safe rail network with all the additional costs and restrictions that implies, ORR and Government should be seeking to raise the current appalling level of road safety to something even remotely approaching that already attained by rail. Does anyone at the DfT tell Secretary of State Chris Grayling how many extra lives will be lost each time he decides not to proceed with electrification or other rail improvements?

The looming arrival on our roads of both autonomous vehicles and lorry convoys controlled by a single person in the leading cab provides the opportunity and surely the need to create some form of modern road equivalent to HMRI and RAIB. When it was created well over a century ago, the Railway Inspectorate was not exactly popular in some parts of the railway industry. Nevertheless, over the years the railway has become a so much safer place to be that the expense of further improvement is difficult to justify in comparative terms. Will, for example, the huge cost of implementing the digital

railway actually bring any great further improvement in safety?

Our industry in general, and the Rail Delivery Group in particular, needs to be much more vocal on this issue. It should rigorously question and push back against those few who have a narrow interest in continually pressing for increased safeguards on the railway, seemingly irrespective of cost or effect, while ignoring the realities of comparative risk in the rest of the world. This insular view is propelling us towards an ever more restrictive and thus more expensive railway. That inevitably means that in future more people will take to the road instead. And sadly that means more people will die. 'Health and Safety' is becoming 'Health OR Safety' – in pursuit of the narrow objective of absolute safety on rail, overall people are being put at more risk, not less.

ORR needs to define what that word 'reasonable' actually means in the 'As Low As Reasonably Practicable' mantra. Because at the moment, all too often reason and common sense seem to be forgotten and we wind up with just 'As Low as Possible'. And thus continues the downward spiral, at ever-increasing cost, to the completely safe train. That's right, the one that never moves.

**A** couple of months back I ventured to suggest that, based on experience gleaned from many hours of waiting for trains, none of the now at least a dozen coffee and snack outlets on York station could be accused of being anything but ordinary. But I wouldn't want you to think that you can't get a decent cup of coffee on a station anywhere in darkest Yorkshire. So may I draw your attention to 'The Coffee Station' at Hebden Bridge, voted the 'Best independent station café' in a national competition organised by Railfuture (as a Vice President thereof I declare an interest at this present juncture, although I had no knowledge of or involvement in the competition). Station café customers throughout the country were asked to vote for their favourite independent station café. And there must be something about coffee brewed along the Calder Valley line, because just two stations along, at Sowerby Bridge, the Jubilee refreshment rooms came joint third in the same competition. 

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