

An aerial photograph of a town, likely in the UK, showing a railway viaduct with a train crossing it. The town is built on a hillside, and the background features rolling green hills under a clear sky. The title text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

# BRANCHING OUT

## *Railways for Rural Communities*

Paul Salveson

Transport Research and Information Network

Sponsored By:

Countryside Agency, Rail Passengers' Council, Railway Development Society

Supported By:

Association of Community Rail Partnerships, Platform/Transport 2000







# Branching Out

## Railways for Rural Communities

*A good practice guide*

**Paul Salveson**

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# *Preface*

## **Stewart Francis, Chairman of the Rail Passengers Council (formerly CRUCC)**

This document is being published at an important time. The process of franchise replacement is well underway and spending decisions on new or increased funding for transport are being made. Also there is press comment on the financial difficulties faced by some train operating companies and the problems facing rural communities. Everything points to a new start being made for rail travel in general – but what might these changes bring for rural railways?

*Branching Out* highlights the major themes that could form part of this new vision for rural railways. Increased investment and funding stability is needed – franchises of up to 20 years in length could provide this. Local management and control is vital to bring the benefits to local communities that more distant management might not spot nor have the energy to pursue. The high level of some fares continues to cause us concern – how can the railways ever become more socially inclusive unless the basic bar to accessing services, the cost, is reduced?

Partnership is key. The old command and control structure of railways operation has now gone and has been replaced by a number of organisations whose incentives and aims must be aligned to produce the results passengers want from the railways. Again, through the Rail Regulator's review of track access charges and the innovative work of rail passenger partnerships this is now beginning to happen. We all need to look at how such partnerships between passengers, train companies, local authorities and the regulators can be encouraged.

Underpinning all the issues raised in the report is the level of government support for the railways. Quality transport services cannot be provided on a shoestring. With adequate funding to support existing services and create new partnerships the 'virtuous circle' of more passengers, more revenue and more investment will be kick-started. We strongly believe there is a bright future for rural rail if the right incentives and structures can be put in place.

Stewart Francis

Chairman  
Rail Passengers' Council



## **Message from the Director General of the Railway Forum**

This good practice guide from Transport Research and Information Network offers an attractive vision – a service of high quality modern trains on rural networks, with stations providing gateways to lively, sustainable communities.

In numerous examples it brings out what can be achieved through a partnership approach. The key to success involves clarity about objectives; collaboration; and commitment.

The report rightly notes the importance of local authorities, national parks and Regional Development Agencies recognising rail's importance in their development plans, and proposes that community-rail partnerships should be brought more closely into the planning process. With an important cycle of Local Transport Plans now in progress, the advice is timely.

In all of this, it is essential for all concerned to recognise the substantial benefits which rail can offer in terms of reduced congestion and pollution, improved amenity, and economic stimulus.

When these wider benefits are factored properly into the equation, the case for improving rural services is greatly strengthened.

Congratulations to Transport Research and Information Network and its sponsors on opening up the debate in this highly informative document.

David Morphet

Director General









# Introduction

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**D**o we need our rural railways? The last couple of years has seen a resurgence of interest in the 'branch line problem' which stretches back as far as the 1900s. A couple of well-publicised comments by a government minister and a railway manager about possible 'bus substitution' of rural rail services led to an outcry over possible closures and 'another Beeching'. The initial furore has died down, and now is a good time to take a broader look at some of the issues.

This booklet is an attempt to put forward a reasoned case for why rural railways are good for the health of rural communities: both for people who live there, and for the growing number of people living in urban areas who visit the countryside. The arguments aren't based on emotion, despite the appeal of romantic images of the traditional rural train with a Great Western 'pannier tank' at the head of a string of chocolate and cream-liveried coaches. The vision which informs this booklet is quite different: that of high quality, modern trains providing frequent services for children and students going to school and college, taking workers and shoppers into town and bringing visitors out to rural areas. In this vision, stations are gateways to lively, sustainable rural communities. They are places to feel proud of, and hubs of village life.

It's something you can see in many parts of Germany, Switzerland, Sweden and in other parts of Europe. The railway is part of the community, with its staff and managers based

on the line, not in some far-away headquarters. The local authorities work closely with the railway – sometimes they even own it. Local businesses recognise the railway's economic importance to the community and see it as part of the social fabric of the region.

Some of Britain's rural lines have started to prosper – often through the community-rail partnerships which are highlighted in this book. These partnerships are unique to Britain and have shown that rural railways can get onto a virtuous spiral of more passengers and improved services. A lot more could be done, and the current process of franchise replacement, overseen by the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA), is an excellent opportunity to look at ways to capture the full potential of our rural, or secondary, network. There's a chance to make a step change in the quality of rural train services, with more trains and better facilities. The rural lines function as important feeders to the national rail network, helping to create a critical mass of train services.

Already, railway companies have presented imaginative proposals for replacement franchises, which include major improvements to several rural lines. This booklet is a contribution to the discussion on the future shape of Britain's rural railways, as part of an expanding, high quality national integrated transport network – and a key element in creating sustainable rural communities which are no longer dependent on the car.





# The Branch Line Era

Britain's branch lines were catalysts for rural economic development in the nineteenth century. They gave farmers a means of getting fresh produce, and livestock, to the rapidly growing markets of industrial Britain. The station was a focus of village life, with the development of housing, often for railway workers' families, the station pub, and small shops. Whilst the grand architectural designs of St Pancras or Paddington are well known, often a great deal of pride – and money – went into quite small stations, for example Francis Thompson's stations on the North Midland Railway and the rural stations of the Furness and North Eastern Railways. They were built as gateways: places to feel proud of. The station area, typically, would include a goods shed, cattle dock and sheep pen, and facilities for loading and unloading merchandise. Even small stations could employ as many as 50 staff, dealing with a mixture of passenger and freight duties. Railway employment was relatively well-paid, compared with agriculture: a 'job for life' – if you followed the rigid discipline of the Victorian railway companies.

## Hopeless cases

Let's not get too romantic. Train services were not frequent, and they certainly weren't fast (the Somerset and Dorset Railway was known as 'the slow and dirty'!). The idea of regular interval services didn't really catch on in the nineteenth century, and there was no competition to encourage the railway companies to improve their services. Service quality on some railways became matters of public criticism, and even scandal. Scores of branch lines never came near to making money for their parent companies, and the many small independent rural lines were uneconomic. As David St John Thomas commented in *The Country Railway*, 'it became clear to officials and directors of too many lines that it was hopeless; the railway may have brought prosperity to their valley, but not to them'. Nevertheless, they were valuable feeders to the main-line network.

## The Light Railway Era



Welshpool and Llanfair Railway - now a thriving tourist line.

The end of the nineteenth century saw renewed attempts to make rural railways pay. The Light Railway Act of 1896 encouraged the building of new lines to less rigorous standards which were felt to be more appropriate to remote rural areas such as the west of Ireland, rural Scotland, East Anglia and the south-west. The aim of the Act was to provide improved communications to rural areas to assist in their economic development. Many lines were built as narrow-gauge, such as the Lynton and Barnstaple and the Welshpool and Llanfair, which is still operating as a tourist railway.

## The first 'Community Railways'

Some rural lines, were genuine 'community railways' promoted by local people. Sometimes the local landowner took the lead, but it was not unusual for local farmers and professionals to make what, to them, were quite sizeable investments in 'their' railway. The Kelvedon and Tollesbury Railway, which won its Light Railway Order in 1898, was enthusiastically promoted by Sir William Abdy, the largest local landowner. He donated five acres of his own land to the railway and persuaded his neighbours to contribute further plots. Lines like Kelvedon and Tollesbury never prospered. Often, the few that did were precursors of the great 'heritage railway' boom of the 1970s and 1980s. The Ffestiniog and Vale of Rheidol were advertising the scenic attractions of their routes



as early as the turn of the century. In its opening year, 1905, the Leek, Caldon and Waterhouses Railway was promoting excursions from the Potteries into the Manifold Valley. The Lynton and Barnstaple advertised itself as 'journeying to the Switzerland of England' making a direct appeal to the more prosperous middle classes who would have abjured the delights of Clacton or Blackpool.

## The Government steps in

The 1896 Act established the Light Railway Commissioners who could grant Light Railway Orders without the expense of an Act of Parliament. Some Treasury financial aid was available. However, the lines which were built were often constructed on main line principles, avoiding town and village centres in favour of easier alignments: a mistake which was to prove fatal in many cases. In addition, the Act stated that before light railway promoters could get Treasury support they had to show that an existing railway company would construct and operate the line. This often led to major companies such as the Great Eastern reluctantly taking on the role of operator, but bringing little in the way of innovation and enthusiasm to the enterprise.

Despite the lower costs of operating a light railway and the absence of competition, few prospered. After the First World War the decline accelerated, as motorised road transport arrived. Traffic receipts dropped even further and the Government stepped in. It appointed a Light Railways (Investigation) Committee which commented on the need for 'a solution of the problem by way of co-operation and co-ordination rather than of competition, between light railway enterprise and road motor transport respectively'.

## Beginnings of co-ordination

From the turn of the century we can find examples of co-ordination between road and rail in rural areas. The Great Western began operating buses to the Lizard and other parts of rural Cornwall before the First World War. The Great Eastern also ran some bus services, such as that from Chelmsford station to Great Baddow. Some of these networks became very large and ultimately led to the demise of the railway which they were originally designed to

serve. The Londonderry and Lough Swilly is perhaps the most famous example; the railway closed down in the 1950s, although the buses still operate to this day. Many bus drivers in rural areas are still members of the RMT railway union, reflecting the bus companies' origins as railway-owned operations.

## Was there innovation?

Some independent rural railways had energetic managers. Perhaps the most dynamic was Henry Forbes, general manager of the County Donegal Railways between 1919 and 1948. He introduced diesel and petrol railcar operation when it was unknown in Britain, and revolutionised operating practice. Colonel Stephens is perhaps better known. Something of a martinet figure, he had a determination to develop lines which others regarded as lost causes. He cut costs down to the bone, using second-hand locomotives and rolling stock and providing minimal passenger facilities. As a result of his work several lines survived to this day, becoming popular tourist railways like the Kent and East Sussex, Ffestiniog and Welsh Highland. The Bere Alston and Calstock Railway is now part of the Plymouth to Gunnislake branch.

If the economic and social value of lines like the County Donegal had been recognised earlier, they may still be with us performing valuable transport functions, as well as being a major draw for tourists – much as the independent railways of Switzerland have become.

## Decline

The 1950s and 1960s saw scores of branch line closures, culminating in the string of withdrawals following publication of the 'Beeching Report', *The Re-Shaping of British Railways*, in 1963. Some lines targeted by Beeching were saved and today are prospering – for example the Leeds to Ilkley line and the Braintree branch. Both are now electrified with frequent services. Yet these were the exceptions, and line after line succumbed to the infamous axe. Perhaps some really didn't have a future, though it is difficult to avoid the feeling that if decision-makers had looked to the next ten or twenty years they may have foreseen the enormous growth in road traffic





*Horton - in - Ribblesdale on the Settle-Carlisle Line. Closed in 1970, re-opened in 1986*

which Britain has experienced and stepped back from destroying what could have provided an alternative.

The flood of closures in the 1960s became a trickle in the 1970s. However, this period saw many of the 'bus replacement' services provided in the wake of line closures, themselves being withdrawn. This was paralleled by the decline of other rural services, including shops, health facilities and employment in traditional industries. The decline of public transport was part of a wider pattern of rural dis-investment.

A cash-strapped British Rail continued to reduce service levels throughout the 1970s, and de-staffed hundreds of stations. The Serpell Report, published in 1982, seemed to presage a new round of closures, with suggestions once more of a profitable 'core network' if the rural elements were removed. Whilst the provisions of Serpell were not acted upon, the survival of the rural network remained very uncertain.

## **Beginnings of revival**

The Conservative Government's proposal in the mid-1980s to close the Settle-Carlisle Line re-ignited the flame of opposition to line closures. A massive campaign of opposition led to the line's reprieve in 1989: a turning point in the fight for Britain's rural railways. There has been no significant closure proposal since then.

The tide is now starting to turn in rail's favour. This is driven partly by road congestion, and a realisation that simply building more roads generates more traffic. Rail can provide a more comfortable, higher-quality alternative to the car. Government policy slowly began to shift in rail's favour in the closing years of the last Government. That tendency has continued under the present administration, with the Integrated Transport White Paper and establishment of the Strategic Rail Authority.



## *What use are rural railways today?*

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Railways have to justify their continued existence. They are not a cheap form of transport, and the upkeep of infrastructure and operation of trains is costly. A detailed research project was carried out by TR&IN during 1997 on the social, economic, and environmental benefits of rural railways. (*What use are Rural Railways - 1997*). It covered four lines in detail: East Suffolk (Ipswich – Lowestoft), Exeter – Barnstaple, Huddersfield – Penistone – Sheffield, and Derby – Matlock. It was clear that each line was playing a distinct rôle depending on a range of local characteristics. These can be summarised as:

- Providing short to medium distance journeys for commuters, shoppers, and schoolchildren
- Providing short to medium distance journeys for people without access to a car for leisure trips and visiting friends and relatives
- Acting as feeders into the InterCity network
- Bringing visitors from urban areas to the countryside, medium to long distance
- Providing a means of transport when people are on holiday in rural areas (who may have come by car)
- A tourist attraction in itself, for scenic and historical reasons

Several rural lines are important feeders to InterCity services, for business and journeys to work. The Lowestoft – Ipswich line is a good

example, with about 60% of passengers using the line transferring to other rail services at the end of the branch. Of these, 75% are travelling to London or beyond. If the branch did not exist, people would either drive quite long distances to the nearest main line railhead, or drive for the entire journey (the principle of 'I'm in the car so I might as well keep going'). About 40% of the Exeter – Barnstaple line's passengers change at Exeter for onward journeys by rail.

Many rural lines are highly dependent on schools traffic. The Esk Valley line, from Middlesbrough to Whitby, carries around 120 school children from villages in the Esk Valley to Whitby schools. There are poor road links in the valley, with steep climbs out of the villages to the main road. It isn't unusual for these to be blocked in winter.

Several lines change their user profile at the weekend. The Derby-Matlock line is heavily used by commuters travelling from Matlock, Cromford and Belper into Derby on weekdays, with a large number of inbound visitors from the East Midlands using the line on Saturdays. Derby has serious congestion problems and rail offers a fast journey to the main station, with good feeder buses to the city centre.

The Penistone line, serving several rural communities in West and South Yorkshire, is primarily used by local travellers for shopping and journeys to work, with young people using





it to get to town for leisure at weekends and in the evening.

Many lines are seasonal, with large numbers of visitors carried in summer, and numbers dwindling in winter. These include the West Highland Line, several of the Devon and Cornwall branches, the Heart of Wales Line, Cambrian and Conwy Valley routes. These lines are vital for the local tourism industry, but their importance can be overlooked if passenger counts are carried out in the low



Llanwrtyd Wells on The Heart of Wales Line - heavily used by summer tourists.

season or during the school holidays. This practice was not uncommon in the Beeching era.

## Who uses rural railways?

The idea that rural railways are 'lifelines' for rural people without access to a car has an element of truth. However, many people use rail who do have access to a car, and choose rail because of its comfort and speed. In our survey on the Barnstaple Line we found 19% of passengers able to drive, with a car available, but preferring to use the train because of ease and convenience (including not having to worry about parking in Exeter). On the East Suffolk Line (Ipswich to Lowestoft) some 32% of local rail travellers could 'easily' have used the car for their trip, but preferred the train.

However, many people do not have access to a car:

- Over 24% of rail users on the East Suffolk Line said they would not make their journey if the train service wasn't there, and
- 31% of the passengers did not have access to

a car;

- 57% of passengers either had no car, or had a car in the household but they were not able to drive.

Young people are amongst rural railways' biggest users, for both school and college journeys, and for leisure trips, especially on Saturdays. On the Exeter to Barnstaple line, 44% of the users we surveyed were under 18. The profile of users by age drops between 25 and 44, but begins to rise again, particularly for the over-55s.

On the Derby-Matlock line 27% of the long-distance passengers were over 55. The age profile of many rural communities is rising, and people who are currently heavily car-dependent may find themselves unable to drive in years to come. Good public alternatives for this group of people will be important. Perhaps the biggest challenge is maintaining the use of public transport made by young people, so as they get older they don't just switch to using a car.

## Suppose the line closed?

The Policy Studies Institute published a study in 1980 (*The Social Consequences of Rail Closures* by Mayer Hillman and Anne Whalley) which showed that the social impact of rail closures was significant. It found that only a minority of former rail passengers transferred to the replacement bus services, which themselves were often short-lived.

The more recent TR&IN study found that many existing rail passengers would transfer to car if the rail service ended, rather than use a replacement bus. On the Barnstaple line, a total of 44% of local passengers said they would use the car, with only 21% opting for a replacement bus service. A majority of Penistone Line rail passengers, most with a reasonable spread of local bus services in their areas, still thought their existing journey would be difficult or impossible if the train service did not exist.

The clear message of the two studies is that people will only very reluctantly change from rail to bus, and are far more likely to use the car if the train was not available. On the other hand, a sizeable minority of people using rural railways have access to a car, but prefer to use the train because of its comfort, speed and convenience.



# *Their strengths and weaknesses*

## **Strengths**

Rail plays an important economic role in many rural areas. It is of great importance to the tourist economy in parts of North Wales, the Scottish Highlands and the South-West. In 1991 some nine million tourist journeys were made by rail involving at least one overnight stay. Rail is a serious alternative to the car for the growing number of people who work in urban centres but choose to live in rural areas. It is a means of overcoming social exclusion - a lifeline to many people who do not have access to a car but live in rural communities with very sparse public transport services.

Rail is a safe, energy-efficient, low-polluting form of transport. Rural roads are disproportionately dangerous compared to urban highways. (see the Railways Forum's *The Wider Impacts of Road and Rail Investment*, 1999)

Many rural railways are experiencing a revival in freight traffic which has led to the removal of thousands of lorry journeys each year from narrow country roads. Lines such as the Far North from Inverness to Caithness now carry timber and other traffic. Rural lines have



*Rogart, on ScotRail's Far North Line. The station now provides tourist accommodation*

the advantage of providing existing facilities for loading freight traffic, compared with the very high cost of building new sidings on busy main line routes.

## **Weaknesses**

Many rural lines survived the 1970s and 1980s by a whisker. The number of trains was reduced on a large number of lines despite objections from bodies including the central and regional RUCCs. Today, people living in the Esk Valley have just four trains a day in each direction whereas in 1988 they had nine. Commuters working in Middlesbrough have no suitable train: the first departure from

*Freight revival: The Settle-Carlisle line is once again a major freight route*  
*Photo courtesy of Ken Harris*





Whitby is at 09.15. The same situation exists on the Heart of Wales Line and several more. It's vital that frequencies are improved: whilst many urban routes now have their highest-ever frequencies many rural lines have a poorer service than they enjoyed ten years ago.

Infrequent service is a serious weakness, but so too is the level of fares on



*Class 142 'Pacer' at Whitby - a product of the lean and mean 1970s*

many lines. The traditional mileage-based system has long since been replaced by a mixture of market-driven fares, but there are many glaring inequalities on rural lines. The level of fares on lines such as Exeter - Barnstaple is much higher per mile than those on the Derby - Matlock or Ipswich - Lowestoft lines.

A further weakness is the combination of poor quality rolling stock using poor track. Trains used on rural routes like the class 142 'Pacer', built in the 1970s by a resource-hungry and poverty-stricken BR, may have helped several rural lines to survive a bleak period, but are inadequate for today's passengers. The ride is uncomfortable and passenger facilities are poor. They will not persuade motorists to leave their cars.

The fundamental weakness affecting rural lines is the lack of strong management attention. They form parts of large franchises which are managed from a head office remote from the rural parts of the network. Managers simply don't have time to devote to routes which carry a small proportion of their traffic.

## Opportunities

Rail has unparalleled opportunities in many parts of rural Britain. The traffic congestion which has forced thousands of urban commuters to switch to rail has come to the

village square. Many small towns and villages can no longer cope with traffic levels throughout the year, let alone during the summer peak. Many roads in national parks, such as the Peak Park in Derbyshire, are clogged with weekend traffic making life for local residents a nightmare and destroying the very character that attracted the visitor in the first place. Railways that serve these 'honeypots' could offer a serious alternative to the car if they were integrated into traffic management schemes and a long-term strategy for sustainable development.

Whilst rail has exciting opportunities to bring visitors into rural areas, it can also offer a serious alternative to the car for journeys from the rural periphery to urban centres. Lines such as Matlock - Derby, Exmouth - Exeter, North Berwick - Edinburgh are used by large numbers of commuters. Their success is partly due to the 'sticks' of traffic congestion on the roads, often stretching from the urban fringe into the city centre. Growing numbers of restrictions on city centre car access and parking are further factors. More positively, free or cheap car parking at stations and a fast, comfortable journey into the city centre are the 'carrots' that rail can offer motorists.

Rail is winning new freight traffic, much of it originating in rural areas. There is great potential for more freight if links can be made with the rural business community, and if local authorities can be pro-active in their planning policies to ensure major new development is rail-served. Such freight use helps make a better case for a line's retention and improvement of its passenger services.

The most immediate opportunity for improving rural railways lies with the franchise replacement process currently under



*North Berwick Community Council - actively involved in supporting the line*



way. This has encouraged existing and potential train operators to take a fresh look at all aspects of the railway scene, and come up with some innovative solutions. The SRA's Rail Passenger Partnership Scheme has opened up new sources of funding for developing rural rail services, such as the new winter service on the Esk Valley line.

## **Threats**

Rail is coming back into its own as a safe, attractive and sustainable form of transport. Growth on Britain's railways is taking place at about 5% each year, with some commuter lines experiencing much bigger growth. However on some lines – mainly the rural routes – the increase is below average and in some cases is actually in decline.

Rail works best when it is handling high volumes of traffic, whether passenger or freight. Many rural services carry only handfuls of passengers for much of the day, tying up rolling stock which could otherwise relieve severe over-crowding on other routes. This is where the 'bus substitution' arguments start. Running a bus is certainly cheaper than running a train, but evidence suggests fewer people will use buses. Roads do not, in any case, always follow the same line of route as the railway. The point is to make best use of both modes, as elements of an integrated whole, rather than set them up in competition with each other. The real competition for rail is the car.

The subsidy profile of all regional franchises

reduces each year. This reduction of support has caused serious problems in maintaining rural services and has to stop. It is time we viewed rail subsidy as investment and not as a prop for an ailing industry.

Reducing rail services will force more people onto the roads and will weaken local economies. The threat to such services is less strong than it was, but there are still some who would be more than happy to close down rural lines if it was politically possible to do so.

## **Need for new thinking**

Rural rail does have some exciting opportunities, but we've got to come up with innovative ways of capturing them. The current management of rural railways is, in many cases, inappropriate. Unless managers are aware of, and exploit, feeder traffic the rural lines will risk being neglected. Being part of large, sprawling franchises, with depleted management resources, there often simply isn't the management time to spend on rural railways carrying a few hundred passengers a week, when the problems of heavy commuter or inter-regional express services carrying thousands each day are far more pressing.

There are many good examples of how to turn round the fortunes of rural railways, at home and abroad. The rest of this paper highlights a range of approaches which have exploited rail's strengths and led to a renaissance in rural public transport.



## *A new approach to rural railways*

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There are many examples of good practice here in Britain as well as abroad. Solutions will vary according to local circumstances, but there are several common threads. These are:

- **Focused management:** if a rural line doesn't have someone clearly in charge and locally-based, don't expect it to achieve much
- **Dedicated staff and rolling stock:** staff who are regular to a line get to know the passengers and develop a sense of pride in the line; dedicated rolling stock can be specially branded to reflect a local identity
- **Partnership:** neither the train operator nor Railtrack can turn round the fortunes of a rural railway on their own. They need to work with local authorities and the wider community, ideally through partnership structures. Local people must be involved.
- **Investment:** no amount of marketing will cover up the cracks caused by historic under-investment in trains, stations and infrastructure. Revenue support is vital to encourage growth.
- **Network effects:** rural railways are part of a national, and international rail network. They need to connect easily into InterCity and other longer-distance services
- **Quality:** rural train services must offer a reasonable level of frequency with good quality trains and safe, attractive stations. The aim should be for a minimum standard of one train per hour, with only a few exceptions where very low population levels (e.g. North of Scotland) cannot justify this. The Passenger Service Requirement, specified by the Strategic Rail Authority, should include improved frequencies, the times of first and last trains, and weekend services.
- **Integration:** it isn't just railways: they have got to link up with other forms of transport, be it park and ride, cycling and walking, feeder buses, or demand-responsive community transport services

And it isn't just transport: rail should form a corridor for sustainable development, with housing, business activities and community facilities located at or near stations. Land-use

planning has got to connect with transport policy to ensure development really is sustainable.

### **Partnerships**

The last few years have seen an exciting growth of community-rail partnerships. These are usually informal structures which bring together train operators, Railtrack, local authorities and the wider community in the promotion and development of a line or group of lines. Rail partnerships are ways of bringing the railway and the community closer together, acting as linear development agencies along a rail corridor. Rail partnerships encourage their members to see rail not just as an isolated form of transport, but as a key part in a much broader canvas including integrated transport, land-use, economic development and tourism, and other areas of social policy.

The Association of Community Rail Partnerships now has over twenty member organisations, covering lines from as far north as Thurso and Wick, down to Penzance and Swanage. The Association provides a means for partnerships to share ideas and experience and promote the importance of rural railways amongst national decision-makers.

### **The Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership**

First established in 1992, it has brought together a wide range of partners including Wales & West (the train operator), Railtrack, local authorities and national parks. It promotes the network of branch lines in Devon and Cornwall for both visitors and local people. Activities include:

- **Promotional literature:** last year it published 200,000 copies of 'Great Scenic Railways of Devon and Cornwall' and a range of individual Line Guides for the Tarka, Tamar Valley, Looe Valley and Falmouth branch lines. Leaflet racks are supplied to major tourist attractions and hotels.
- **Events:** The Partnership has organised special events on trains, such as a Jazz Night, a Carols Train, local exhibitions on



the history of the railways, and other media events

- Station Improvements: Most local stations now have tailor-made 'welcome' posters at their exit points. Local artists were used to research and design each poster. Other small-scale improvements have included new seating and station refurbishment
- Information: posters have been provided at several stations with connecting bus services; rail information posters have been erected in town and village centres.

All of the Devon and Cornwall branches are experiencing growth, with the Looe and Falmouth branches experiencing the biggest increases.

## The Penistone Line Partnership

The Penistone Line runs from Huddersfield to Penistone, Barnsley and Sheffield, serving a mixture of urban and rural communities. The National Lottery Charities Board funds a development worker for the Partnership, which was established in 1994 with a volunteer-run structure. It originated the idea of live music on scheduled trains, and still runs monthly Jazz Trains and other special events at Christmas and on other occasions.

The Partnership is at the forefront of community development initiatives on railways. It works with local schools on educational projects, and community groups such as Womens' Institutes, on improvement





initiatives, such as gardens and interpretation. Its *Tracking Lives* project involves local people building up an archive of material to create a community history of the line and the towns and villages it serves.

The Partnership has worked with Passenger Transport Executives to identify scope for new bus links, and supported a project at Denby Dale which led to the award of Rural Bus Challenge funding for a bus-rail interchange and new bus services linking the rail service with outlying villages.

It also organises:

- Monthly guided walks from stations along the line
- Days out for members and friends
- A quarterly community newsletter

The service on the line is the best it has ever had, with additional evening and Sunday services introduced over the last three years. Passenger numbers continue to rise, averaging 10% growth each year.



*The Penistone Line's famous Jazz Train*



*Santa Train delights children on the Penistone Line*



*Penistone Line guided walks. A family outing at Shepley*

### **The Essex Community-Rail Partnership**

The Partnership is based in a refurbished station building at Mistley, on the Manningtree to Harwich branch. As well as supporting the Harwich branch it also covers the Southminster and Walton-on-Naze lines to the south of the county. Its activities include:

- developing 'community adoption' schemes for stations
- preparing funding packages for station renovation
- developing 'Lineside Action Groups' for the three lines
- producing leaflets promoting rail travel and bus links on the three lines
- promoting local attractions which can be reached by rail
- organising special 'on train' events e.g. Santa Train



## Settle-Carlisle Business Liaison Group

This is a unique partnership, bringing together local businesses along the Settle-Carlisle railway corridor which have a commercial interest in the railway's survival. It's living proof that rural railways and small businesses have intertwined interests, and has a membership of over 50 companies. They include shopkeepers, hoteliers, and firms involved in e-commerce. The businesses involved, and groups including Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line and the Settle-Carlisle Railway Development Company, have made a massive difference to the line, with stations which are warm and welcoming, and key parts of village communities. The group publishes a quarterly newsletter *Business Line*.

## Re-openings

It isn't just urban areas that are getting new railways and re-opened stations. There are a number of successful examples of line re-openings in more rural area.

### Robin Hood: Nottingham to Worksop

The re-opening of this line between 1993 and 1998 provided new opportunities for people in the former coalfield areas of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. The project involved major infrastructure work, including digging-out a tunnel and constructing a short section of entirely new railway. The scheme



Robin Hood Line - the first day  
Photo Nottinghamshire County Council

was financed by the EC, central Government, local district councils and the two county councils. Passenger numbers at some 3000 trips per day have surprised many observers, with trains being frequently overcrowded.

## Ribble Valley

The Blackburn to Clitheroe and Hellifield line lost its passenger service in the 1960s, but survived as an important freight corridor into the 1980s. Ribble Valley Rail was formed in 1991 to campaign for a regular passenger service over the line, and developed a highly effective relationship with Lancashire County Council and Ribble Valley Borough Council.



Clitheroe's new interchange

Their efforts were crowned with success in 1994, when an hourly passenger service was introduced, extending the Manchester to Blackburn service with new stations at Ramsgreave and Wilpshire, Langho, Whalley and Clitheroe. The group has continued to promote the service, and work closely with First NorthWestern and Lancashire County Council on service quality issues. The county council has invested over £350,000 on a bus-rail interchange at Clitheroe station, which opened in May 2000. The funding has been matched by DETR's Rural Bus Challenge, the Countryside Agency and the East Lancashire Partnership. Support has also come from Railtrack and First North Western.

### Okehampton: The Dartmoor Railway

One of the lines which Mayer Hillman and Anne Whalley examined in *The Social Consequences of Rail Closures* was the Exeter to Okehampton line, which closed to passengers in 1972. It's about creating an intermodal gateway to Dartmoor, promoting tourism without traffic - linking bus, rail, cycling and walking. The line is now enjoying a remarkable revival due to a highly innovative public-private sector partnership. The line from Crediton to Okehampton and Meldon Quarry is owned by Bardon Aggregates, the quarry operators.

On the initiative of Devon County Council,



passenger services returned to Okehampton in summer 1998, with Sundays-only shuttles



*Okehampton before*

linking into a network of bus services at Okehampton which take visitors out to Dartmoor. Okehampton station is being restored to its Southern Railway glory and has a buffet, craft and model railway shop. Funding has come from Devon County Council and a range of other sources, including The European Union and The Countryside Agency. The track maintenance contract was won by RMS Locotec, who recently took over the lease to operate the railway itself as far as connection with Railtrack at Crediton. RMS operates as 'The Dartmoor Railway' and in the summer of 2000 will be running the 'Dartmoor Pony' shuttle from Okehampton station to Meldon Quarry.

Dartmoor Railway Ltd promotes the seasonal passenger service from Exeter,



*Okehampton after*

*Both photos: Devon County Council*

contracting with Wales and West Railway to provide a diesel multiple unit and train crew. Fares are collected by Dartmoor Railway staff. The next stage could be for Dartmoor Railway to charter its own rolling stock using more tourist-friendly trains.

## Settle-Carlisle Line

The line survived a concerted attempt at closure in the late 1980s, but several of the local stations had already been closed down by BR in 1970. These included Horton-in-Ribblesdale, Ribbleshead, Garsdale, Lazonby, Langwathby and Armathwaite. These stations were re-opened in 1986, to the delight of local people and the thousands of visitors who come to the Yorkshire Dales each year. Fortunately, the station buildings had survived and many have been transformed into attractive accommodation for business activities. Langwathby station has an excellent restaurant and mini-museum. Horton-in-Ribblesdale recently won the 'national community spirit' prize for its spotless waiting rooms and outstanding appearance. Ribbleshead station is being transformed into an Interpretation Centre, complete with a caretaker's flat on the premises. All the stations are well cared-for by the local community, through the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line. The Settle-Carlisle Railway Development Company has brought a strategic focus to the development of the line, pulling in funding for station enhancements such as period-style lighting and seating, and improved passenger facilities.

## Innovation in private railways

The last few years have seen a growth in innovative schemes which are outside the Railtrack network, but have potential to connect into main line railway services. Much of this is down to a growing maturity of 'heritage railways' which are looking to broaden their range of activities, becoming more than just providers of a tourist attraction.

## Swanage Railway

The Wareham to Swanage branch closed in 1972 and the track was ripped up. A group of preservationists agreed a lease for the trackbed from Dorset County Council, and began operating over a short stretch of line. Further extensions allowed the railway to reach Corfe Castle, and then Norden in 1992. Norden is close to the main Wareham to Swanage road, which funnels most of the visitor traffic to Swanage along a narrow route through the historic village of Corfe. Funding from Dorset County Council and Purbeck District Council





Two views of the Swanage Railway : hopes are high about the chances of re-connecting to the national network

led to the creation of a 120 space park and ride facility. Motorists are able to park at Norden and use Swanage Railway services to get to their final destination. The park and ride has been progressively extended and now has some 500 spaces, most of which are in use at the height of the season.

The next step for the railway is to re-establish the link with the main line at Wareham. The Purbeck Rail Partnership has been formed to bring key players together to progress a scheme which should see regular, all-year passenger services linking Swanage with Bournemouth. The scheme has already cleared the first hurdle of the Shadow SRA's Rail Passenger Partnership scheme.

### Mid-Norfolk Railway

The line from Wymondham to Dereham and Fakenham survived into the early 1980s with occasional grain traffic. The Mid-Norfolk Railway Society was formed to restore the railway as a multi-functional operation, combining heritage operations with commuter services and freight. The railway has won funding from several sources and now operates a weekend passenger service from Dereham to Wymondham Abbey. In addition,

the Ministry of Defence has used the railway to transport tanks from a nearby base. There is serious interest in using rail amongst grain companies in the area.

In the longer-term, the Mid-Norfolk Railway believes it has the potential to provide commuter services to Wymondham and through to Norwich, either running the service themselves or using the services of an existing train operator.

### Bodmin and Wenford Railway

This heritage railway has a subsidiary, Bodmin and Wenford Railfreight Ltd, which moves freight traffic produced by Fitzgerald Lighting from Bodmin to Bodmin Parkway, for collection by EWS's freight services. The railway has ambitions to re-open the branch to Wenfordbridge for clay traffic. Even more ambitiously it wants to extend from Boscarne Junction, west of Bodmin, to Wadebridge and ultimately Padstow, to run regular all-year round services. The railway is hoping to receive funding for a detailed feasibility study.



## User involvement

Britain has the biggest network of rail user groups anywhere in the world. This remarkable growth owes much to the efforts of the Railway Development Society, the umbrella group for local rail user bodies. These are invariably small, entirely volunteer-run organisations which work closely with train operators and local authorities to lobby for service improvements. A growing number have become pro-active in supporting rail, producing local timetable information and undertaking small scale schemes at local stations.

### Cotswold Line Promotion Group

The group covers the Oxford to Worcester and Hereford line and has nearly 2000 members. It has played a key role in rallying support for service improvements on the line and has developed a close relationship with train operators First Great Western and Thames Trains. Several stations along the line have benefited, with improved information, delightful station gardens and new seating.

### Friends of Penmere Station

At the opposite end of the spectrum to the Cotswold group, the Friends has a handful of members who look after their local station on



Penmere station - a shining example of community involvement

the Truro to Falmouth branch. A couple of local people started work on improving the semi-derelict station environment five years ago, and it has since been transformed to a showpiece rural station, with magnificent gardens and

shrubs, and period-style signage sponsored by the local Marks and Spencer store. Railtrack has provided a new, attractive shelter.

### Friends of the Barton Line

The Barton line runs from the quiet Lincolnshire village of Barton upon Humber to Grimsby and Cleethorpes, joining the main Doncaster line at Habrough. The group was formed to celebrate the centenary of the line but so much enjoyed what they were doing, they decided to keep going. The Friends have organised a number of special events, the most recent being a 'birthday party' for Barrow Haven station and an inter-station pub crawl!

### East Suffolk Travellers' Association (ESTA)

ESTA is one of the oldest, and largest, local users' associations, having been formed when the Ipswich to Lowestoft line was saved from closure in 1967. Much of its publicity is aimed at particular villages and towns along the line, with local timetable leaflets distributed door to door. It has stalls at local events and maintains its own information boards at stations. The association has good relations with Anglia Railways and bus operator First Eastern Counties, but reserves the right to make constructive criticism. Members undertake regular user surveys and feed comments into the operators.

## Integration

The last few years have seen an upsurge in the number of integrated transport services in rural areas, mostly involving scheduled bus services, but some using Section 22 licences for 'community bus' services. Sustrans and local cycling groups have been working with highway authorities and Railtrack to provide safe walking and

cycling routes to stations. The issues were looked at in detail in TR&IN's *Getting the best from bus and rail in rural communities*, published in 1999. There are a great variety of solutions, but the stress in rural areas must be on making



the best use of scarce resources, with very high levels of integration between bus and rail. Attention to detail, such as careful timetabled connections which are maintained in practice, regular drivers, through ticketing, good information – and liaison between bus and train operators when things go wrong – is crucial.

### Liphook to Bordon

Stagecoach won the first rail passenger franchise – for the SouthWest Trains network – in 1994. As part of their franchise commitment they provided two new rail-link bus services,



*Rail Link bus waits for the train at Liphook*

from Liphook to Bordon and from Winchester to Romsey. The buses are timed to connect with trains to and from Waterloo, and are painted in special RailLink livery. The team of drivers is dedicated to the service.

### Cardiff Valleys

Valley Lines and local bus operators have developed the network of RailLink bus services inherited from BR and Mid-Glamorgan County Council. They include:

- Ystrad Rhondda to Maerdy
- Rhymney to Tredegar
- Merthyr to Brecon
- Aberdare to Hirwaun



*Ystrad Rhondda - bus and train meet*

The buses are operated by a mixture of local companies, including Stagecoach and some independents. Buses are in RailLink livery, mostly using regular drivers. There is through ticketing from Valley Lines stations and rail tickets can be purchased on the bus to rail destinations served by Valley Lines.

### The Coggeshall Minibus, Essex

In many ways this is the modern equivalent of the Kelvedon and Tollesbury Light Railway. A genuine community enterprise, the bus service provides a link for commuters living in the Coggeshall area, to the railhead at Kelvedon. During the day the bus provides services for local pensioners, before picking up commuters at Kelvedon in the evening. The service is provided under Section 22 of the 1985 Transport Act which allows volunteer-driven minibuses to operate community services.

### Bus Links at Grange-over-Sands

The Grange-over-Sands Railway Promotion and Conservation Group publishes a useful guide to local bus links from the station. The publication is funded by train operator First North Western and includes details of where to



*Grange-over-Sands: conserving the best of rails heritage*

stay in the area, as well as bus and train times. The station has been magnificently restored by Railtrack and features a second-hand bookshop and newsagent's and bookstall. The station is staffed.

### The Tenterden Rail Link, Kent

A local businessman established this 'community bus' service with help from Kent County Council and the Countryside Agency.



It operates from Tenterden to Headcorn, providing connections to London services. The bus has built up a regular clientele, becoming in effect an informal social club. The bus means that commuters don't have to worry about finding a parking space at the busy station car park. If the train is late coming back the bus will wait for its customers.

### Denby Dale, West Yorkshire

Denby Dale station is on the Penistone Line, between Barnsley and Huddersfield. The station is located high above the village, so access is not easy. A local partnership and West Yorkshire PTE put together a proposal for an integrated rural transport service with the



VillageLink bus waits at Denby Dale interchange

station as its focus. EC and Rural Bus Challenge funds were awarded to build a new interchange at the station with two new bus services: VillageLink serving a network of communities in the area, and ThroughLink running directly to Wakefield. The services are operated by a local firm on tender from the PTE. Buses are branded in a distinctive RailLink livery and drivers are contactable on a mobile phone, so passengers are always sure they will be picked up. A co-ordinator has been appointed to develop the scheme further.

### Intergrating bikes and trains

The cycling charity, Sustrans, is developing several safe routes to stations, for walkers and cyclists, around the country. It is working with Railtrack and local authorities to identify existing routes which can be improved, with better lighting, signage and traffic management measures, as well as creating new routes which avoid motorised traffic altogether. The proposed walking & cycling route from Abergavenny town centre to the station is a good example.

The Cyclists Touring Club and Bikerail are embarked on a national initiative to intergrate bikes and trains.



Hundreds of bikes at Lund station, Sweden: bikes and rail works if there are safe routes to the station



# Rural Railways in Europe

## Regionalisation brings results

### Switzerland

Regionalisation of local rail services is sweeping Europe. Many countries are adopting the 'Swiss model' of small, locally-



Swiss private railways locally managed pioneers  
Photo courtesy Jungfrau AG

owned companies which provide feeder services to the main line network, operated by Swiss Federal Railways (SBB). Public transport is highly integrated. Times of local buses, including Post Office services, are included in the SBB timetable. Most of the independent railways are 'vertically-integrated', being responsible for both train operations and infrastructure. Most are electrified and several are metre-gauge. There is strong local authority involvement in the ownership of many of the small companies which often run both bus and train services as an integrated whole.

### Germany

Following re-unification, the German federal government passed laws to 'regionalise' local rail services. The regional governments were given powers to franchise local passenger services. The way this has been done varies around the country, with some länder retaining direct responsibility, and others devolving powers to a more local level. German Rail (DB) has won several contracts, and established a special business unit to respond to the challenge of regionalisation. In several cases independent companies have

won franchises, including some industrial railways.

### The Düren County Railway (DKB)

The DKB's involvement in local rail services was a pilot scheme for regionalisation, and the results have satisfied everyone. Two branch lines from the industrial town of Düren, to Julich and Heimbach, were handed over to the Düren County Council in 1994. The council already had its own local bus company, the DKB, which started life in the nineteenth



DKB trains pass at Niedeggen

century as a tram operator. The company invested heavily in the run-down branch lines, improving track, re-building stations and integrating rail services with its bus network. New 'Regiosprinter' trains were ordered from Siemens which were delivered in 1996. The trains represented a dramatic improvement in quality, with on-train information systems, ticket facilities, and plenty of room for bikes and luggage. Passenger numbers on the lines



Local management brings results;  
DKB's Dietmar Litterscheid



continue to increase, and half-hourly frequencies were recently introduced. Bus and rail services are fully integrated under a single management.

The line has an active user group which works closely with DKB. The group is lobbying politicians to re-open a number of lines in the area to extend DKB's network. As well as its core passenger service, DKB acts as track authority for DB Cargo which operates some freight traffic along parts of the lines. There are also summer steam-hauled trains along the two lines, using a privately-owned steam locomotive which DKB occasionally borrows for engineers' trains.

### The Schönbuchbahn

This line runs from Boblingen to Dettenhausen in Baden-Württemberg. It closed to passengers in the 1980s and re-opened in 1998 as a result of the land government and local authorities developing a package which included complete track re-laying, new stations and new Adtranz Regioshuttle trains. The service links several rural communities into the growing town of Boblingen, connecting with fast commuter services to Stuttgart.

## The Netherlands

The Netherlands Government recently decided to split several of the most peripheral rural lines from the main Dutch Railways (NS) network. It has specified a rolling programme

to franchise of local lines which and should be complete by 2004.

### Syntus

One of the first lines to be separated from NS ownership was the rural network based on Doetinchem, near Arnhem, extending east to Winterswijk and then north-west to Zutphen. A new company was created as a result of two friends getting together: the NS manager at Doetinchem and his counterpart in the local bus company. They developed their vision for one transport operator providing bus and rail services in the region, and persuaded the Dutch Government to back them. Syntus was the result: a company owned jointly by NS, local bus interests, and Connexion of France.



Syntus operates bus and rail services in rural Holland

The new service started in May 1999, and is a fully-integrated rail and bus operation, with drivers trained to

operate both buses and trains. Frequencies have been improved and there are plans for new interchanges at several stations along the route. Syntus is currently using diesel units hired from NS but has ordered eleven new 'LINT4' two-car diesel units from Alstom.



New Stations - New trains. ADtranz Regio-Shuttle on the Schönbuchbahn



## NoordNed

Centred on the northern city of Groningen, NoordNed (Northern Network) is a joint venture between NS and UK-owned Arriva. The initiative is, like Syntus, still in its infancy but already there is improved integration between local bus and rail services. Noordnet operates train services on the Leeuwarden to Harlingen and Stavoren lines. It also has a sub-contract from NS to run trains on the Groningen to Leeuwarden line.

## Sweden

Sweden has perhaps gone furthest in decentralising railway operations. The Government legislated for a separate infrastructure body, Banverket, in 1988. They also allowed county transport authorities to tender local rail services, to get better value for money and improved integration with bus services. Up to the 1990s there was just one train operator, Swedish State Railways (SJ) which expected to win all the county contracts. However, a small local bus company, BK, surprised everyone by winning contracts in the south of the country. Today, several more operators are on the scene including The Train Company and BK itself, trading as BK Train.



BK train at local bus-rail interchange in southern Sweden

## The Jönköping County Network

Jönköping county, centred on the town of that name, covers a large part of southern Sweden. It was the first county transport authority to put local rail services out to tender and awarded contracts to BK Train, which was able to offer lower prices and better value for money than SJ. The authority, which is half-owned by the county council and half by the district councils in the area, owns a fleet of

trains which currently comprises Fiat railcars. All the operator does is run the trains, and maintain the units at its workshops in Vetlanda. Savings on contract prices have led to introduction of new services. The transport authority has introduced smart-card ticketing on trains and buses and has made an order for a fleet of new trains, to be delivered next year.

## The Inland Railway

The Inland Railway extends some 1076 km from Östersund to Gällivare in the north of the country. The highly scenic route has teetered on the brink of closure several times and is, in many respects, Sweden's Settle-Carlisle Railway. The infrastructure does not belong to Banverket: Inlandsbanan AB is a vertically-integrated company, with a subsidiary which operates a limited number of passenger trains over parts of the line. It acts as track authority for other operators, including freight companies which move timber and other goods from depots along the route to other parts of Sweden. There are popular tourist services in the summer months, some using steam. Trains stop at several stations along the line which are now owned by local businesspeople, offer a range of local cuisine and crafts.

These examples show that with focused management, a close relationship with local and regional government, and investment, rural railways can be transformed into prospering, modern forms of transport.

## A partial renaissance

It isn't all good news. In some European countries, for example Italy, subsidies are being cut. In eastern Germany several rural lines have closed while the situation in Poland and Hungary is even more precarious.

We should learn from the positive examples but recognise the different social, political and economic contexts in each country. The next section includes some ideas on how the continental experience of local management can be applied in the UK.



# Planning for Rail

Throughout most of this century, railways have been poorly integrated into wider planning concerns. There was a brief glimmer of hope after the Second World War, but that was quickly extinguished. Things are starting to change. The term 'sustainability' wasn't heard of until a few years ago. Now it is at the core of planning policy. Compared with roads, railways are a highly sustainable form of transport. New Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) from the Government will include a Regional Transport Strategy, providing a means by which rail can be integrated into the planning process. However, there is a risk that bland assertion ('public transport is a good thing') will over-ride serious work in identifying rail's potential role at the regional level.

Local authorities have a new role in promoting integrated transport, through their Local Transport Plans. More detailed attention needs to be given to ways of integrating rural railways with other planning policies, including Structure Plans and Local Plans. Joint Teams of planners and transport officers could work with rail operators to develop practical plans which have rail at the centre of integrated transport plans and local development plans.

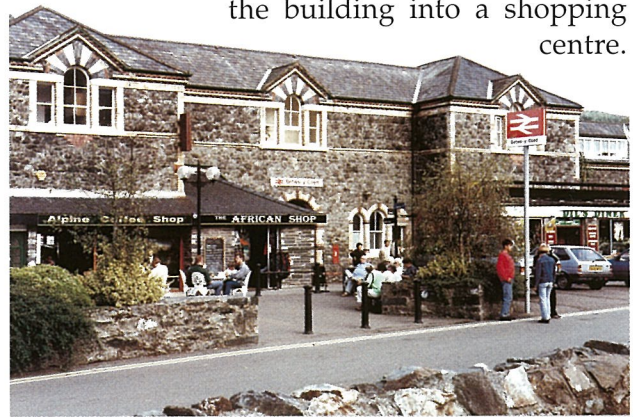
## Stations of excellence

Particular attention should be given to encouraging development at and around stations, re-integrating them into the heart of town and village life. Again, this isn't something which one organisation alone can achieve. It needs the involvement of Railtrack, the local authority as planning and highway authority, the train operator, and very often a private entrepreneur. In many cases, local community groups can play a major role. The rural station must be seen in a very different way from its role as somewhere to get on and off a train, with minimal facilities. Stations are gateways: both into rural communities, and gateways out to the wider world. The following examples show how stations can be transformed into bustling centres of activity,

becoming places that people positively enjoy using.

### Betws-y-Coed

The station was semi-derelict until a partnership involving Gwynedd County Council, the local community council and British Rail developed plans to transform the building into a shopping centre.



*Betws-y-Coed station - a hive of activities*

The station now boasts two cafes, craft shops and a transport museum. The centre of gravity of the village has shifted markedly towards the station, making it a lively hub of activity.

### Southminster

The station building was derelict and at risk of demolition. The Essex Community Rail Partnership brokered a deal which has turned the building into a Healthy Living Centre.



*Southminster: from decay to rebirth. Construction work begins*  
*Photo courtesy of Essex CRP*



## Whitby

The former station buildings at Whitby were re-developed by BR and then Railtrack as 'The Whitby Quays'. The units provide space for a café, a picture framers, hairdresser's and an Indian restaurant. One of the units remained empty for several years, until the Esk Valley Community Rail Partnership brought train operator Northern Spirit, bus company Arriva and the North Yorkshire Moors Railway together to create a 'One Stop Bus and Rail Centre', which handles bus, rail and NYMR travel enquiries as well as ticket sales.

## Wymondham

The winner of 'best kept station' awards on a regular basis, the station has no staffed presence but boasts an excellent café, a small



Wymondham - have a brief encounter

museum, and a piano shop. During the summer, passengers can enjoy lunch on the station platform, or on cooler days sit inside the buffet warmed by an open fire.

## Settle

The Settle-Carlisle Line has benefited enormously from the work of the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line (FoSCL) an entirely



Phyllis and Glyn Hague staff the FoSCL shop at Settle Station

voluntary group. Some of their best work has been at Settle station itself, where the Friends now have a shop in the station buildings. The station is staffed by Northern Spirit, whose staff take an enormous pride in their job, reflected in beautiful station gardens and well-kept buildings. The Friends were instrumental in persuading Railtrack to re-site a redundant railway footbridge at the station, which means passengers do not have to use the foot crossing to gain access to the Carlisle platform.

## Convivial Trains: Beyond the Pacer

The trains used for many rural services are not adequate for the needs of today's rural traveller. On many scenic lines the staple rolling stock has seating that impedes the view out the window. On other lines 'Pacer' trains offer a ride which can be rough and uncomfortable. We are not aware of any serious plans to replace the inadequate trains currently in use on most rural lines, but unless improved vehicles are provided it will be difficult to attract new business, and existing users may be lost.

## Rolling stock revolution in Germany

Rural lines in Germany are getting new trains from various manufacturers. Examples include the Siemens Regiosprinter, the Adtranz



Plenty of space of bikes

Regioshuttle and GTW/6; and the Talent 'Turbo'. These different designs all offer a high quality passenger environment; good standards of accessibility; plenty of space for luggage and cycles; and excellent visibility. Why not a British equivalent? The UK rail manufacturing industry is enjoying a revival. Isn't it time they, passenger groups, leasing companies and train operators, got together to develop a high quality train suitable for low passenger densities?



## Ultra Light Rail Solutions



The Parry People Mover

The Parry People Mover and similar designs offer scope for linking communities into the rail network at low cost. PPM systems can provide feeder services for shorter, low-density services to a main-line railhead.

## Creating a friendly train

Public transport offers something the car can't provide: conviviality, the mixing of people from different social and cultural backgrounds. Operators could make a virtue out of what is often seen as a necessity. How?



Friendly staff make a difference! Ashley Whitwam at Huddersfield

An effective way to develop a good relationship between staff and passengers is through regular, dedicated crews on particular routes. This develops commitment and awareness on the part of staff, and regular passengers like to see a familiar face on the train. Regular staff get to know the line, the places it serves, and the customers. Everyone gets better information and assistance.

## Have special events on trains

The Penistone Line Partnership invented the 'music train', which has brought hundreds of non-rail users back to using the train, occasionally and in some cases regularly. Organising special events on the train, whether it be a music session, a carol concert or 'Santa Train' at Christmas, or some other 'celebratory' event is a good way of promoting rail travel, and great fun! A more recent initiative of the Penistone Line Partnership arranged school

trips along the line, where children wrote poetry about their experience – helped by a professional poet. There's no end of activities



Special Events: Easter Eggspress on the Penistone Line

which can be tried, ideally during quieter periods of the day. The results are positive publicity which highlights the train as a convivial and pleasant form of travel, and winning new customers for rail.



Poetry in motion - budding poets on the Penistone Line

## Making better use of what we've got

Whilst existing trains may be far less than ideal, imaginative refurbishment can help a lot. For example, better seating configuration to give everyone a view; aural and visual information facilities on the train; more space for bikes and luggage; and careful attention to design: use of colour and fabric and local branding so the train feels part of the local scene, with regional information displays and artwork reflecting the places the trains serve. Why not give trains local names, like Anglia's diesel fleet? Trains can be dedicated to a particular network, whatever planners say! Apart from occasional heavy maintenance there's no reason why part of a fleet cannot be allocated to a particular group of services, e.g.



Esk Valley and Saltburn lines; Heart of Wales; Devon and Cornwall branches, with appropriate back-up arrangements.

## **The high-tech branch line**

Rural railways need good quality trains and stations – the visible parts of the railway. They also need good track and modern infrastructure. High quality track ensures a comfortable ride and allows for a reasonable level of speed. Modern signalling and telecommunication systems bring operating costs down, and improve flexibility. Major investment is going into some rural lines, for example the Bittern Line from Norwich to Sheringham. A new signalling system is being installed which will lead to the removal of the numerous signalboxes along the line, allowing greater operational flexibility and the capacity to operate the line 24 hours a day without requiring extra staff.

Rural trains do not need to run at 125 mph – but there does need to be an improvement in the speeds on some lines so they can compete with the car. The average speed on the Esk Valley Line between Middlesbrough to Whitby line is 27 mph with 15 intermediate stops. Line speeds along much of the route are as low as 25 mph and seldom rise above 40 mph. A reasonable average speed would be nearer 40 mph with maximum line speed increased to 60 mph where possible. Lines such as Esk Valley need to be looked at as a whole, with potential for track and signalling improvements considered alongside improved train services.

On rural lines there is an argument for a single organisation to run the trains and also be responsible for track maintenance, on behalf of Railtrack. It is difficult to justify major investment in rural railways on purely commercial grounds, but packages involving Railtrack, the operator, local authorities and EC funds could bring the sort of improvements for which many lines are crying out. Railtrack can play an active role as 'landlord', offering use of redundant track and other equipment from high-speed lines.

## **Maximising the social benefits**

Rail can play a part in overcoming rural social exclusion. By providing services to peripheral villages, the train is a lifeline for many people

without access to a car. The recent initiatives in bus-rail integration, funded by Rural Bus Subsidy and Rural Bus Challenge, have opened up new opportunities for many people. Yet fares remain a problem. Low pay and poverty are still a reality for many people in rural areas and the train can be unaffordable for some people.

In too many cases, the train only offers a partial service. Many rural lines have no Sunday service, and it isn't unusual for the last train to be in the middle of a weekday evening, making it impossible for people to get into town for leisure activities, or to get home from longer distance business trips.

Some positive examples below show what can be done.

### **Local Residents' Railcards**

These have been developed by rail partnerships working with train operators on several lines and networks. The Cornwall Railcard costs £7 for a year and gives a third off all fares from Plymouth westwards. The Dales railcard offers similar discounts for people living in the area served by the Settle-Carlisle line and Lancaster-Skipton line. The Highland Railcard offers 50% discounts on some lines in the winter period.

### **Off-peak season reductions**

The Cambrian Line Partnership, which includes Central Trains, developed an idea to drastically reduce off-season fares on the line from Abersystwyth and Machynlleth to Pwllheli. This led to a big upsurge in local residents' travel on the line. Central Trains has also offered 'two for one' deals on the line which proved highly popular.

### **New Sunday services**

The Esk Valley Line, between Middlesbrough and Whitby, has not had a winter Sunday service for many years. This has resulted in local people having very restricted weekend travel opportunities, and visitors discouraged from making weekend breaks to the seaside resort of Whitby and the neighbouring national park. The local authorities, led by the Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit, a consortium of Tees-side local authorities, put together a Rail Passenger Partnership proposal to the Strategic Rail Authority for a basic winter service. The bid



was successful and the new service begins at the end of September 2000.

### Heritage railways initiatives

Several heritage railways offer local residents' railcard allowing local people to use heritage rail services at substantial reductions. The Worth Valley Railway's Local Residents' Railcard is free on proof of a local address and offers substantial discounts on fares. The Ffestiniog Railway (FR), as well as promoting a Local Residents' Card, also offers through travel at discounted prices, effectively making the railway part of the national network. A super saver ticket from Porthmadog to Manchester would be valid via the Ffestiniog Railway to Blaenau Ffestiniog, and the FR-section of the fare is calculated at 'privilege' rate, which is roughly quarter fare.

### New evening services

The Penistone Line won additional evening services through the efforts of the two PTEs, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire, working with Railtrack and Northern Spirit to identify suitable resources at relatively low cost. The last train from Sheffield to Huddersfield is now 22.44, compared with 20.15 before the change.

## Microfranchising: bringing management to the local level

The success of many of the rural railways on the continent lies in the way they are managed. Lines like the Düren County Railway were every bit as inadequate as some of Britain's rural railways are, until ownership and control was handed over to the local community. This provides the essential basis to start to turn round a line's fortunes, with energetic marketing, improved staff motivation, investment, and integration with other forms of transport in the area. The result has been thousands more people using trains and lower requirement for subsidy.

There is growing interest in the UK in the concept of 'microfranchising', a term which includes a wide range of options for decentralising management of 'secondary' lines. The approach can work in the British context if train operators and Railtrack are willing to take a fresh look at how rural railways are managed.

*Options for microfranchising include:*

- Wholly-owned subsidiary of a parent train operator, providing feeder services to the main line
- Joint venture between a TOC and local interests, e.g. a bus company or a heritage railway
- Sub-contracted operation from a parent TOC to a local operator
- Independent operation

In the case of all the above operations there is scope for bringing some integration back between train service operation and infrastructure maintenance. This will help bring costs down and provide improve track quality

However, there is a strong case for less onerous standards to be applied to low-speed rural railways based on 'tramway' safety procedures.

Bringing back local management opens up creativity and provides a focus which is not there at present. It is also good for local economies. If a line is operated locally, the staff, and manager/s, is based in the communities which the railway serves. This in itself is a major boost to the economy. In addition local railway management can procure some goods and services locally, for example catering and cleaning.



# Conclusion

## Closure isn't an option

Rural Britain is becoming more heavily-trafficked than ever before, and more cars will choke the potential growth in tourism in many rural areas. There are still plenty of people in rural Britain who do not have access to a car and depend entirely on public transport. A growing number of professionals are choosing to live in the countryside and commute to jobs in urban centres. Rail offers a serious alternative to the car, and a means of reducing social exclusion.

If we're serious about achieving modal shift from car to public transport, rail offers the best way to achieve this, providing the quality is right. It's more difficult to get people to use buses, especially for longer-distance journeys, though we've got to make sure that bus and rail are far more closely integrated.

Closing rural railways is not an intelligent option. It would repeat all the mistakes which were made in the 1960s. Instead, we should be looking to develop existing lines, so they provide improved services for residents and visitors, with frequent high quality services which are fully integrated with local buses and with the InterCity network. In some cases new

lines may be justified, learning from best practice abroad.

### ....but neither is standing still

Closure of rural railways would be economic and social suicide for rural areas, and political suicide for any government which tries to carry it out. So should we just carry on as we are, pouring large amounts of public money into rural lines which only serve a handful of passengers? Clearly not. These lines have got to be developed imaginatively, with strong, effective partnerships between operators, local authorities, Railtrack and the Strategic Rail Authority. We need to get the right balance between a flexible and supportive national framework, and concerted local action. We need to involve local communities as active participants, not passive consultees. To make a qualitative difference there must be a long-term programme of investment in rural railways, justified on social, economic and environmental grounds. This may mean applying different criteria to those used for urban schemes, with more stress on rail's benefits in overcoming rural peripherality.





### **A national strategy for rural railways ought to include the following:**

- The government should make very clear its commitment to the development of rural railways, with closer links between The Countryside Agency, DETR, and Strategic Rail Authority. A small working group could be established to develop policy and help disseminate best practice. Similar working groups should be formed by the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Executive.
- Rural communities need a higher level of service. A national target of a minimum of one train an hour for weekdays should be established, with one train every two hours minimum on Sundays – with only isolated exceptions where very small population levels do not justify such frequencies. This should be built into the Passenger Service Requirement so operators have to comply with the minimum standard.
- The year-on-year decline in financial support must stop, with increased (but targeted) support for improved services.
- Rural railways must be seen as core elements of strategies for local and regional development. This means local authorities, national parks and regional development agencies recognising rail's importance in their development plans, and encouraging new development at stations and other locations which can be rail-served.
- Local Transport Plans should aim to develop rail as the core of integrated rural transport strategies, making effective use of bus, cycling and walking, community transport, and park and ride.
- Community-rail partnerships should be brought more directly into the planning process, and encouraged to take on a more pro-active development role. This could include taking over disused railway property and developing it for housing or business activities which could help provide additional business for the railway. This may involve partnerships creating new structures, such as community development trusts, to actually own land.
- Many stations on rural lines have great potential for development. Partnerships involving Railtrack, the train operator, local authority and local community could be formed to develop practical proposals which would enhance the use and attractiveness of the stations.
- There should be regional audits of disused railways which could have a future role. These could be carried out by regional development agencies as part of their strategies for sustainable rural development, and feed into Regional Transport Strategies.
- Train operators need to be more visionary in their approach towards the rural parts of their networks. In their bids for franchise replacement, evidence that will develop the potential of their 'peripheral' routes should be expected by the SRA. Operators should also involve local and regional authorities in putting together their proposals in order to win community support for their plans.
- Railtrack should look to invest in the rural network, with modern signalling and telecommunication systems and upgraded track.
- In some cases, microfranchises for rural branch lines should be developed, building on best practice in Europe. These could be part-owned subsidiaries of train operating companies, or more independent bodies. Potential for 'vertical integration' with train operation and track maintenance carried out by the same company should be considered.
- Heritage railways can play a positive role as transport operators in some locations. The examples of the Swanage and Mid-Norfolk Railways should be looked at by other railways to see if they also have potential for running 'community' passenger services, or freight. Local authorities and the SRA will need to be involved in this process if serious potential is identified.
- Rail user groups, and Rail Passenger Committees, need to work closely together on pro-active policies for local and regional rail development, giving direct support to innovative proposals for developing rural railways.



## *What do you think?*

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**W**e have tried to put forward a positive case for rural railways. What do you think? Here are a few questions on which we would appreciate your thoughts and ideas.

- How can rural railways be more closely integrated into local authorities' development plans and economic development strategies? If you have any good examples, please send them in.
- What works, and what doesn't work, in integrated transport? Are you aware of any local good practice, e.g. a rail-link bus; safe routes for cyclists and walkers; community transport initiatives which feed into rail?
- Should there be a national minimum level of rail services. Is an hourly frequency a reasonable aim? What exceptions, if any, should be allowed?
- Is local control of rural rail services the right way forward? What sort of company structure would be appropriate, e.g. a subsidiary of a large train operating company; a small independent private operation; a not-for-profit community business?
- How can community involvement in rural railways be further developed? What are the difficulties? Are you aware of local good practice?
- What should national bodies be doing to support rural railways, e.g. Strategic Rail Authority, Countryside Agency, Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly? Is there a role for the regional development agencies?

You don't need to confine yourself to these questions. If you have any other ideas or observations, please send them to us at TR&IN, Brian Jackson Centre, New North Parade, Huddersfield HD1 5JP.





# Further reading and contacts

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## Further reading

Several TR&IN publications cover aspects of this study. The following provide more detail:

*What use are rural railways? The social, economic and environmental benefits of rural railways*, 1997

*Getting the best from bus and rail in rural areas*, 1999

*Railways in the community* (Conference proceedings; includes paper on local railways in Germany and Switzerland), 1996

## Other publications:

David St John Thomas *The Country Railway*, 1976

Mayer Hillman and Anne Whalley *The Social Consequences of Rail Closures*, 1980

John Scott Morgan *The Colonel Stephens' Railways*, 1999

Michael H C Baker *Irish Narrow Gauge Railways*, 1999

The Railway Forum *Rail Strategy and Sustainable Development*, 1999

The Railway Forum / OXERA  
*The Wider Impacts of Rail and Road Investment*, 1999

Rural Development Commission (now Countryside Agency) *Country Lifelines - good practice in rural transport*, 1996

## Useful contacts

**Association of Train Operating Companies**  
40 Bernard Street, London WC1 1BY

**Rail Passengers' Council:**  
Clements House, 14-18 Gresham Street,  
London EC2V 7NL

**Countryside Agency**  
Dacre House, 19 Dacre Street, London SW1H  
ODH

**Strategic Rail Authority**  
55 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0EU

**Railway Development Society**  
Roman House, 9-10 College Terrace, London  
E3 5AN

**The Railway Forum**  
12 Grosvenor Place, London SW1X 7HH

**Transport 2000/Platform**  
The Impact Centre, 12-18 Hoxton Street,  
London N1 6NG

**Association of Community-Rail Partnerships/TR&IN**  
Brian Jackson Centre, New North Parade,  
Huddersfield HD1 5JP

**Community Transport Association**  
High Bank, Halton Street, Hyde, Cheshire  
SK14 2NY

**Sustrans**  
35 King Street, Bristol BS1 4DZ

**Heritage Railway Association**  
33 Palmerston Place, Edinburgh EH12 5AU

**Branch Line Society**  
37 Osberton Place  
Hunters Bar Sheffield S11 8XL





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