



Remodelled layout: Avanti West Coast Pendolino No 390044 speeds south at Carstairs on the new Up Main (formerly the alignment of the Down Main) with the 11.36 Glasgow Central to Euston on 28 July 2023. Ian Lothian

commissioning of Motherwell power box, which, at the time, was the largest on the network. That layout was thus never signalled by 'multiple signal boxes'. In his book about the electrification scheme, O.S. Nock described Carstairs and its revised layout as the most changed on the route. It was completely different to its steam-era predecessor, which was controlled by multiple signal boxes and had extensive sidings.

SIMON READER

By e-mail

TARKA LINE POTENTIAL

Further to your Great Western issue last month, the region's community rail lines have an established reputation for growth above and beyond the norm of conventional lines. The Barnstaple to Exeter 'Tarka line' is no exception, with patronage reaching an all-time record high in the year to March 2023 and 11.3% up on the pre-pandemic year to March 2020. This pattern has continued in 2023-24, with the first two periods of the railway year setting a new all-time high for that eight-week period.

With only an hourly service, and just three services from Barnstaple reaching Exeter before 10.00, after journeys of between 70 and 77 minutes, it's little wonder passengers are being left behind – even at Barnstaple!

For all the current record-breaking in the new post-pandemic era, though, our analysis demonstrates the Tarka line is still significantly

underachieving compared with other Devon lines when contrasting journeys taken with catchment populations served; North Devon achieves less than half of Devon's average per capita station usage per annum, and mid-Devon only slightly over it.

Research and analysis for the recently completed Initial Business Case for the Torridge and North Devon Connectivity Programme, commissioned by the Tarka Rail Association and co-funded by Railfuture's Fighting Fund and GWR's Customer and Community Improvement Fund, demonstrates that a combination of latent demand and population growth over the next two decades has the potential to transform GWR's longest branch line to become the new Northern Devon main line. Progressive increases in ridership associated with incremental infrastructure, service and rolling stock improvements could see line usage multiply fivefold, delivering socioeconomic and environmental benefits for Devon's second-largest population cluster of Barnstaple and Bideford.

GWR MD Mark Hopwood's 'Barnstaple options' (p59) are but the first increments in realising the sought-after 'opportunities to grow'.

TIM STEER

ACE Rail campaign lead,
Tarka Rail Association

ROGER BLAKE

Infrastructure & Networks
Director, Railfuture

EAST WEST ROUTE

I would take issue with John Gilbert's claim ('Forum', last month) that the new section of East West Rail (EWR) between Bedford and Cambridge wanders aimlessly across the countryside.

If he looked at current and planned housing, he would find the proposed route serves a far larger number of potential passengers than the original route. The old line included stations like Old North Road and Lord's Bridge, which is a bit of a clue about the emptiness of the countryside it crossed.

Entering Cambridge from the south is vital for two reasons: serving the busy Addenbrooke's hospital and bioscience site, and enabling freight trains to travel towards Felixstowe without reversing. What a shame that, thanks to a combination of excessive engineering costs and penny-pinching, there is insufficient provision for freight on EWR, and the line will have to be electrified at greater expense some time in the future. However, I suppose we should be grateful that one of the recent transient Transport Ministers was persuaded to resist the temptation to scrap the Bedford to Cambridge project.

DR DAVID COX

Ruislip, London

HS2 HANDSACRE LINK

We are told some senior figures have expressed concern about the long-term viability of the Handsacre link ('News Front', last month). I believe keeping it may prove to be a smart move by the Department for Transport.

It will enable significant acceleration of services to Manchester, Liverpool and Scotland, it will relieve the most congested section of the West Coast main line, and will make much better use of HS2 Phase One than if it had only hosted services to Birmingham. Given the budgetary situation is likely to remain tight, it now becomes possible for the Government to declare that the principal benefits of HS2 have already been realised, and that extending it further would produce diminishing returns.

I would suggest the Manchester branch has a weak financial (if not political) case, with just two trains per hour over an indirect route with a design speed of only 230km/h, compared with 400km/h on the trunk line. In my

view, the so-called Golborne link to Bamfurlong Junction would be of more value, as it would further reduce journey times to Scotland, the route that has the most to gain from competition with the airlines. Journey times to Manchester, on the other hand, are already competitive with both air and road.

PAUL SILVESTRI

Newton Abbot, Devon

NO TO AN ELIZABETH LINE EXTENSION TO ESSEX

Rob Harris admits he has little knowledge of the needs and usage of 'fine Essex folk' for railways and the Elizabeth Line ('Forum', last month). The last change we need is an extension of the Elizabeth Line to Southend Victoria.

Greater Anglia services to and from Southend are full at peak times and well-used off-peak. GA Class 720s have 958 seats (plus 62 tip-up) and toilets, whereas a nine-car Class 345 Elizabeth Line train of similar overall length has just 412 seats plus 42 tip-up.

Shenfield to Stratford with GA takes 15 minutes, whereas the Elizabeth Line takes 34 minutes with 11 stops. Going to Heathrow Airport, we change at Stratford (almost as busy as Waterloo). The terminus at Liverpool Street gives a wider spread of destinations in Central London and a better choice of seats coming home.

To extend to Chelmsford or Colchester would be equally difficult as that route has a very busy and complex timetable, including freight from Felixstowe, though the new station at Beaulieu Park (north of Chelmsford) will sensibly provide loops.

The next move by TfL should be to order the extra carriages for the Elizabeth Line and start proper planning for the King's Line – Chelsea to Hackney.

GEOFFREY BRYSON

Vice President, Southend-on-Sea Railway Travellers Association

WHY MORE CAR PARKING?

I note the plans for a new station building at Darlington (p70, last month). With the world on the brink of runaway climate change and a desperate need to reduce our carbon emissions now, can someone please explain to me why we are building a new multi-storey car park? Build it and they will come.

DAFYDD WHYLES

Retford, Notts