

*The Thinking Woman's Railway
Centre of the Campaign for Real Railways
Home of the Camping Vans, TOAD & TADPOLE*

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Please quote this reference:- 3628
13th April, 2016

Dave Black, Head of Planning, Transportation and Environment,
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RAILWAY RECONSTRUCTION

Dear Mr. Black,

Rail Transport

Have you a maverick in the building? Is there someone quietly slipping his own ideas into policy documents? If there is, can you put me in touch with him?

"Devon Character Areas," part of the landscape assessment of the county lurking in cyberspace, contains a description of "Teign Valley and Slopes." It is well written and informative; it is also wonderfully idealistic in its aims. For instance, under strategy guidance is: "Protect the route of the disused Teign Valley Railway for potential reopening or recreational use."

Now, your department has always been dismissive of the Teign Valley railway route, saying that it had no value in future for heavy transport purposes. So how much weight should I attach to this inconsistent statement found in a county council document? Can I use it to strengthen my campaign? My guess is that it was written by a conscientious environmentalist with a leaning towards railways who acted, harmlessly, without authority.

As you know, the Teign Valley was thrust into the limelight two years ago. On the morning after the breach of the sea wall, I stood on Langstone Rock watching the forces of nature pummelling the railway, and thought that the year thenceforth was going to be interesting. In most previous years I had found some pretext to draw attention to the Teign Valley route; I could see this was a year when I would not have to bother.

But all along, unlike it seems a great many others, I knew nothing in the end would be done. I am realistic enough to accept that the railway's importance is now too diminished to justify the major expenditure being demanded with little thought. It continues to amaze me that some people still believe that the railway is a general purpose system, long after it relinquished most of its diverse functions. Thus there was talk of freight traffic not getting past the blockade, when you and I know that there is practically none in the West Country.

To those whose highly ambitious schemes took no account of population and the railway's paltry share of traffic, I pleaded that they

include a fallback position, something modest and achievable, to cover the danger of ministers taking fright.

The Teign Valley was the least considered or most easily dismissed of the options but it remains the practical railwayman's preference, being able to serve all the existing stations beyond Exeter in an emergency. It would be what it was: a branch line with enhanced diversionary capacity. If Network Rail were kept away from it, the line could be rebuilt for £180-million, roughly ten times what was paid in compensation to train operators and others after the line was reinstated in 2014.

So vast has been the expenditure on roads in Devon and Cornwall that the railway cannot hope to compete with speed, there having been no new main line construction since 1908. In an age when passengers can work and communicate on the move, the railway's strengths should be comfort and deep dependability. This would extend to emergencies, when longer journeys over diversionary routes would be unbroken and accurately timed.

There may be a lesson from history here. In 1939, the Great Western as good as gave up on the government-funded £10-million Dawlish Avoiding Line and in 1943 took £30,000 to install four long passing loops and improved signalling on the Teign Valley Branch.

Anyway, for your amusement or casual information, I enclose "A Summary of the Case for Reopening the Inland Railway Route between Exeter and Newton Abbot" which I circulated widely among politicians and campaigners in 2014. You are probably one who views a madcap's ideas with disdain, so I am under no illusions as to how it will be received.

On my web pages last year I did a retrospection of the 1995 Structure Plan, which I remember at the time gave some hope for the future. Since I wrote it two new stations have opened but I think that my comments are valid. If the plan period had been a school term's work the headmaster's report would have contained a few old clichés.

Twenty years passed during which there was minimal railway development in the county; growing passenger numbers in latter years must be set against the almost complete loss of freight traffic in a true measure of effectiveness. The developments which would undoubtedly have changed people's lives and brought much benefit did not happen. Schemes which may have been the basis of further work never got started, while the massive expansion of public transport generally which I believe is the only option if we are to maintain our civilization, is still nowhere on the horizon.

When I find myself waiting at a station whose minimal facilities are a shadow of those originally provided, I usually reflect on the life that has been lost and the potential unfulfilled. I may look at an abandoned platform, or an office or goods shed used for other purposes, and think of the day that the railway gave them up. How logical and inevitable it must have seemed, and how entirely lacking in moment.

Yet should not an industry that had been able to promote and defend itself have kept a national parcels service and at least some sort of freight distribution system with dispersed sidings and terminals to enable traffic to be won to rail near its source, like Ed Burkhardt tried to revive in the brief days of Wisconsin Central? Surely in the natural course of transport development, with all the advances in handling and control, the railway's reach and capacity would not have been so radically reduced and such a scorched-earth retreat made.

At the many places the railway long ago ceased outright to serve, I always wonder what may have happened had the stations not closed. I

picture modern equipment overlain on the ruins and try to imagine the difference even basic rail services would have made to the surroundings and hinterland. But the railway pulled out and a generation has grown up and grown old knowing only dependence on road transport. Particularly in the wastelands of North Cornwall, Mid-Devon and Central Somerset, the railway is an irrelevance.

This sense of loss can be taken further: once it is determined that a railway should be rebuilt or a station reopened, the long period of delay denies rail transport to people whose lives may have been made better, or even saved. Think of the countless journeys that would have been made to and from Tavistock had the railway been rebuilt not long after the first feasibility study was done in 1991, and how this reopening would now be strengthening the case for reinstatement of the former main line.

Such is the belief that railways cannot be rebuilt once they have been ruined, at least in this part of the country, campaigners are more likely to press for reopenings of lines that are merely disused. Thus the rump of the Moretonhampstead Branch from Newton Abbot to Heathfield is frequently brought up locally and nationally, it being the only network line in Devon devoid of any service. The latest suggestion is a Stourbridge-type operation using a lightweight Parry unit.



On 10th October, 2015, the 1642 Heathfield to Paddington return *charitex* is seen creeping along what remains of the Moretonhampstead Branch.

But, as with the county plan, local authority aspiration has weakened. From Heathfield Station being mooted for possible future use as an interchange in the mid '90s, it has only the vaguest mention in the latest local plan. And this at a time when you are preparing to spend £23-million on the corresponding A382.

You know that the Exmouth Branch was listed for closure by Beeching; strangely, because it earnt enough to be spared. From the Southern Region looking at putting on DEMUs at a peak 20-minute frequency, through being in danger of closure, to today, when its future is assured as the busiest of the remaining West Country branches.

Exmouth Branch
Lynmouth-Lyme Regis
Seaton Junction-Seaton (Devon)
Sidmouth Junction-Sidmouth
Tipton St. John's-Exmouth
Exeter Central-Exmouth
Bere Alston-Callington
Halwill-Torrington
Bodmin Road/Bodmin North-W
Pier Head-Ventnor/C

Had the line closed, however, it would almost certainly now be a shared use path for most of its length and any moves to reinstate rail transport would meet with opposition from people who had become attached to the well established amenity. The prolonged process and procedures of such a reopening would also be vastly more difficult than those associated with closure.

The West Country branch line which will be the first to reopen, that from Bristol to Portishead, must have a cast iron case, given the growth of the former River Severn port and the congested roads leading into the city. The track was never lifted and the land not sold; the sections used for a cycleway are merely permissive. Yet still Network Rail's exhaustive G.R.I.P. has to come into play, as if it were the first ever railway and it were to be built on a pristine landscape and affect a population hitherto untroubled by such intrusion.

It is easy for a practical man such as yourself to imagine what would happen in an under-developed country, or here under conditions of national emergency, or what would have happened in earlier times. You know how quickly railway reconstruction could be achieved if the

engineers were given free rein; if they were concerned only with the physical task and were untrammelled by the regulatory millstones.

Though an imposition, the turnpikes were built without much difficulty. These and other roads were greatly improved for motor traffic from the 1920s to the '50s. There followed the era of massive new road construction which was supposed to render the railways redundant. None of this, certainly up to the 1970s, had to face the environmental and economic hindrance now slowing even the simplest railway reinstatement or infrastructure project.

When was there ever a railway equivalent of land taken for a minor road improvement being secured over a 6d. stamp, the method remembered by Michael Hawkins in his book *Devon Roads*?

If we accept that the railway is being called upon to relieve the excesses set in motion by unbridled road expansion, then surely there is justification for some derogations and easements to allow railway schemes to be hastened. Instead of saddling them with a weight of legislation that the competition never had to bear, and which is only possible because of the surfeit of graduates that write the largely meaningless reports and conduct the pointless studies, should it not be enough to show that the alternative would be even more growth in traffic and road space? I know that this is a matter for central government and local authorities must obey the law. Nevertheless, it is human life I am talking about, not a game of chess or a table-top exercise designed to bog down progress. Is it not time for the counties to press for a relaxation of diktats in order better to meet government targets?

You may have heard that Dartmoor National Park Authority has decided to suspend work on its masterplan for the former branch line terminus at Ashburton, rather confusingly referred to as Chuley Road. I am afraid it was me that goaded the railway interests to speak up in the first place, and this led to delay and finally a legal challenge. In fact, although there are some who blame this intervention, the masterplan for a very difficult site fell apart for complex reasons.

In fairness, the national park authority came to see that railway reconstruction, if proven to be viable, would solve many of the hitherto intractable problems at the station and so lately there has been a good deal of co-operation.

To acquaint you with what has been going on and what is intended, I enclose a copy of the group's application for a prize from government's Rail Tourism Competition which has a useful summary of the position.

The next authority we are hoping to meet with is yours, principally to consider how a new line of railway would intersect the roads in the vicinity of Castle Bridge (Peartree), but also to discuss the project with officers responsible for tourism and the economy.

Would you be good enough to identify whom to contact? The case officer at Parke is Dan Janota, Senior Forward Planner.

To dissuade you from thinking that my position is rooted in nostalgia or the desire to regress, I will say this: I am not the kind of environmentalist who wants to see an end to our industrial and technical prowess; I am not the kind of railway devotee who wants to see steam traction and semaphore signalling. My father gave up driving before the war and I have never owned a car, yet I can honestly say that my life has been enriched by having become accustomed to walking and cycling at an early age. My enjoyment has been greatly reduced by the amount of motor traffic and by the inadequacy of public transport.

In the course of the day, when I see perhaps six white vans tear

along my dead end lane, making deliveries which would once have been collected on foot from the station or brought by the postman, I am again struck by the folly of allowing cheap vehicles and cheap fuel to shape our world, when in the long march of history these can only be abnormalities and passing distractions.

Even in this relatively quiet spot, I see heavily-subsidized lorries wastefully making small drops or working to remote operating centres. Everywhere the school day litters the roads with cars carrying children who would once have walked or cycled or used public transport. This ranges from the parents who have chosen the school in the next village, thus replacing a walk with a car journey, to those who drive a hundred miles or more each day to private schools. Even the school bus is a menace: as a cyclist, I find that they are among the most dangerous crates on the road, in the way that they are driven, if not their condition.

And this spills out onto the road system at large, along with all the other aimless and frivolous movement, and the journeys made out of laziness or thoughtlessness or vanity: the dogs being driven to green spaces; the bikes being carried to the start of some "abstract" cycling; the sandwich vans; the grotesque "off-roaders;" the immature boys showing off their feathers; the greying men pretending to be young again, and so on. Despite all the talk about the need to curb car use, the spirit of the "open road" still holds that nothing must slow the motorist down or interfere with his freedom. It is all just traffic arising which, despite your wider job description, you seem to do your best to accommodate without question.

You have hardly an alternative: this is not an authoritarian country and people are free to choose; the fact that choice is seldom exercised with any responsibility does not matter. However, you may take issue with me and say that you happily provide for this pulsating economy driven by cheap oil; that it is a man's duty to use every invention and resource to its utmost extent, for to do less is the kind of timidity that leads to extinction.

Because of its sheer extravagance, I firmly believe that the empire over which you preside is destined to collapse. It is set up to fail as assuredly as the actions on the bridge of *Titanic* led to disaster. And just like the passengers who were dancing and carousing the night away, blissfully unaware of what was about to unfold, most people bound up with their daily grind and manic mobility have no idea what is coming.

But it is not too late to show that you love the railway.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Burges

Owner and Operator

Encl.

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15th June, 2016

Dave Black,
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EX2 4QD

RAILWAY RECONSTRUCTION

Dear Mr. Black,

Rail Transport (Ashburton)

You have not replied to my letter of 13th April.

If you do not wish to make a rejoinder to or comment upon the issues I raised, would you please at least answer the questions I put to you regarding Ashburton, which I was asked to do by the railway group.

This is a serious project led by a planning professional with a blue chip consultancy. He has been able to call upon expertise within his firm and also an accomplished bridge engineer. I have just paid out of my own pocket a £525 bill for Environment Agency conferences. Linking Ashburton to the national network has the backing of Railfuture.

There are three reasons that I can think of why you have not replied: simply that you lack the time; you never correspond with members of the public; or you found my assertions too preposterous.

Ed Chorlton and Ian Harrison I believe would have shown me the courtesy of a response.

Yours sincerely,

C-B-

Colin Burges

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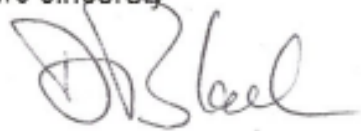
23 June 2016

Dear Mr Burgess

Rail Transport

I am writing to acknowledge receipt of your letters of 13th April and 15th June and advise we will contact you in due course with our response.

Yours sincerely



Dave Black
Head of Planning, Transportation & Environment