

## I BOUGHT A TICKET FOR A TRAIN JOURNEY

by Keith Flinders

I bought a ticket for a train journey, not a bus ride. I have yet to hear anyone saying how pleased they felt when they discovered it was a Rail Replacement Bus. I remember, years ago, a Central Trains manager telling me the [unofficial] policy was not to bother checking if the poor souls on rail replacement buses had tickets. "They're going to suffer enough."

No buffet, no toilets, no tables to sit the family around, no leg stretching - and as for my bike or my friend in the wheelchair, no chance! I turned up at Edinburgh Waverley one Sunday afternoon to be told there had been a late timetable change. It would now be a replacement bus - to Preston! And to make it worse, my wife and I had First Class tickets. Eventually, and reluctantly, we were allowed to come down the East Coast to Birmingham, by train. But why was it not automatic that everyone for the West Midlands was put on the train via York? Something to do with different companies having the franchises. Re-nationalisation will be completed in the next two years, but how long before that way of thinking has gone?

This morning, I've been talking to a friend who is cycling home to Germany next week. He's used to rail companies telling him that there are no trains today between Coventry and Rugby. "You'll have to pedal that bit." Fortunately Eurostar agreed to take his bike to Brussels - but couldn't guarantee it would be on the same train as him!

Rail Replacement Coaches pick up passengers outside Wolverhampton station



It seems that using rail replacement buses has increased during the years of franchising. If I ran a franchise, I'd do it. So much easier - and cheaper. I suspect Network Rail picks up the bill anyway if it's engineering work, and I can leave it to the bus company to sort out drivers. As for my shortage of train crew, it takes a bit of pressure off me. Earlier this year, a tree come down onto the track near Beattock

between Carlisle and Glasgow. Avanti West Coast cancelled their trains north of Preston! To rail users, it looked like 'can't be bothered' was winning. Very quickly, freight [diesel hauled] was running again. AWC didn't have Thunderbird diesels on standby to run a skeleton service via Dumfries nor staff with route knowledge, in the same way as the Settle and Carlisle alternative route last saw AWC diversions in 2013. It is not true that rail users would prefer to be put on a coach up the M6, even if that can be a few minutes quicker. We prefer to stay on the train.

This summer saw a major blockade of Cross City North. The main purpose was putting in the bridge near Duddleston for HS2 tracks into Curzon Street. Quite a few other jobs were, sensibly, planned for the opportunity too. Ironically, the bridge wasn't ready in time. HS2 told Campaign for Rail that a national shortage of welders was responsible and Network Rail's planning process probably meant it would be summer 2026 before they could try again. But, with other work still going ahead, there were no trains on Cross City North [nor to Witton or Perry Barr] for the last week of July.

I accept there may have been difficulties to overcome but did the train operators give in too easily? Why buses all the way from Birmingham New Street to Lichfield Trent Valley, an 80 minute bus journey? Why not a rail shuttle north from Sutton Coldfield? When the next blockade at Duddeston comes, will it be seriously considered to run some Cross City North trains from Birmingham International, via Stechford to Aston and then all stations to Lichfield Trent Valley? Or even from New Street via the Soho Loop and reversing over the crossover at Aston South Junction? Will Lichfield's regular commuters be allowed to take a train to Tamworth and change there, rather than enduring a whole hour and 20 minutes on a bus?

We are now frequently told we are the customers and must come first. In the days when we were just passengers and the joined up railway always tried to run trains rather than buses, I remember a Sunday journey to Tamworth, diverted via Lichfield, where we joined a connecting rail shuttle service. No bus! I once took a Plymouth to Liverpool train, which normally ran from Bristol via Hereford, but on that day the Severn Tunnel was closed. Our route instead was via Worcester Shrub Hill, Dudley [!] and Wolverhampton Low Level. No bus!

And a Sunday morning train, diverted between Birmingham and Oxford via Worcester. That's probably more difficult now with more Great Western services along the single track of the Cotswold Line. But there's a new diversionary route - from Bletchley through Bicester to Oxford. Will the train operators use it when there is a blockade in the Leamington or Banbury areas? I expect it will still be buses along the M40 and A38, because that is cheaper than route learning the diversion.

Too often we hear examples of 'saving money' by dropping routes from train crews' knowledge. Worcester crews who work to Snow Hill but can't take a diverted train from Smethwick Junction into New Street because they no longer sign it; fewer Cross Country crews signing the Stourbridge Line; cutting back Sunday through trains from the Stourbridge Line to Great Malvern, so that their crews didn't need to sign beyond Worcester.



If Great British Railways really wants to be seen as focussing on those of us with rail tickets, it could look at running fewer rail replacement buses. There are potential diversionary routes that are not used. The Chase Line is a fine example; Wolverhampton to Crewe via Shrewsbury is another. Rugby to Birmingham, with reversals at Nuneaton and Coventry, or Birmingham to Nuneaton, reversing at Coventry, would be better than buses.

Finally, if no rail diversion is possible, consider the bus fare cap, or if you are old enough, your bus pass. Earlier this year, I was in Bury St. Edmunds, faced with a rail replacement bus to Cambridge - if I bought a rail ticket. Instead, I used the regular bus through the villages [much more scenic] and changed to another local bus at Newmarket, and saved a lot of money!