

[National Assembly for Wales](#)

[Enterprise and Business Committee](#)

[Inquiry into the future of the Wales and Borders Rail](#)

Evidence from Peter Cuthbert - WBF 22

Observations for the Wales Railway Franchise

Introduction

I offer these observations principally as a user of the Crewe – Aberystwyth route. I have family and friends in Aberystwyth but have also used other Welsh lines as a tourist. That I may move to Aberystwyth in the future is one reason that I maintain a key eye on the events in Wales.

My thoughts are presented firstly, as observations as a passenger on the Crewe – Aberystwyth route and secondly, taking a strategic view of rail services in Wales.

The Cambrian Line

The re-furbished Arriva Trains Wales rolling stock currently used on the line provides a good passenger experience, which is enhanced by the friendly and helpful staff. The provision of a buffet trolley is also a useful feature. One problem that we have experienced is that the high volume of inter-urban passengers means that the quantity of luggage is often considerable. This has meant that it can be difficult or impossible to make use of the wheelchair space. Increased luggage space would be advantageous, but I appreciate that this would require the removal of some seats. If the proposed hourly service is introduced the problem will, perhaps, be reduced.

An associated issue that could be added to the ‘to do’ list of carriage interior re-design would be to increase the cycle carriage capacity of

the units to (say) four. There are numerous popular off-road cycling destinations that are easily accessible from the Cambrian line, so that could provide a source of extra year round tourism income.

Another issue that could usefully be addressed is the timing of connections. The Manchester–Milford service connection with the Cambrian service at Shrewsbury entails 45 minutes wait westbound and 35 minutes eastbound. I appreciate that minimising waiting times is difficult, but it is worth examining the timetable to see if connectivity could be improved.

The Aberystwyth based Cambrian News often carries calls for a through service from Aberystwyth to London. My view is that such a service is not really necessary provided that the Cambrian service makes a good connection with the West Coast main line at Wolverhampton, Birmingham or Birmingham International. Such a connection should include planning for a cross platform or same platform transit. Changing platforms for disabled people, parents with prams and elderly people with luggage is difficult. Another small issue is that the service connection at Dovey Junction to allow travel from Aberystwyth onward up the Cambrian Coast seems poor. I would have thought that this would be a prime tourist route in the summer.

Strategic Developments

The choice of strategic goals for the railways of Wales is obviously a political issue. To my mind, the Welsh Governments should be looking at the railways of Wales as a tool for meeting two principal goals. Firstly, the development of the railways can help meet the pressing need to reduce emissions of climate change gasses by reducing road transport activity. Secondly, the development of the railways can foster wider economic development across the whole of Wales and particularly mid Wales.

i) Economic Development

An examination of maps of Wales that record economic activity suggests that it is mostly congregated in the A55 corridor in the north and the M4 corridor in the south. Looking at the map of Welsh railways this same issue seems to apply in that main services run east-west with England as the focus.

The Network Rail Strategic Business Plan for Wales (1) recognises this problem and concentrates on how to upgrade the Marches line. However, for the majority of Wales, the need to go to England in order to travel north or south is a huge waste of time and energy. George Monbiot raised this lack of Welsh north-south connections and dependence on England back in 2008 (2) . He highlighted the plan by Father Deiniol of Blaenau Ffestiniog to create a north-south route from Rhyl through Denbigh, Rhuthun, Corwen, Newtown, Llanidloes, Rhaeadr and Builth Road to Dowlais using existing abandoned track beds with only two miles of new route.

An alternative suggestion by David Henshaw (3) for a north-south link is the re-construction of the Carmarthen-Aberystwyth and Criccieth-Bangor routes. This is probably a cheaper alternative requiring just 66 miles of track to be laid. This proposal is popular in Aberystwyth with the Cambrian News regularly reporting calls from prominent locals for a re-instatement.

In both cases the proposal would be to electrify the route which would enable it to be powered by renewable sources such as wind or tide, both of which are plentiful in Wales. Switzerland provides a good case study from the 20th Century where steam locomotives powered by expensive imported coal were replaced by electric locomotives powered by abundant local hydro sources.

The proposed routes are, in both cases, blocked in certain places, but not such that alternatives could not readily be provided by creative engineers. The advantages of re-building such routes can be seen

from a similar programme that is in operation in the west of Ireland (4). This is seen as a way of ensuring that the region links in with the rest of the country and can enjoy some of the prosperity from the East. The re-built lines in the Valleys have also exceeded all expectations.

Another argument in favour of the Carmarthen–Bangor route is the proposed re-organisation of the Health Service provision in Ceredigion. This appears to be heading towards moving most hospital provision out of Aberystwyth down to the M4 corridor. Transport links for the people of Ceredigion to the south are poor and the provision of a fast train service to Carmarthen would be a great boon.

ii) Franchise Format & Service Ethos

It was reported in the Guardian (5) that Richard Branson's team thought that railway franchises were 'a licence to print money'. Other press reports detail that the public subsidy to the railways is many times higher than it was under British Rail and large amounts are taken as profits. It is, therefore, appropriate to ask why the Welsh Government is paying a subsidy to a franchise holder whose major shareholder is the German Federal Government. Germany is a prosperous nation and has no need of a subsidy from Wales.

I would thus wish to put my support behind the ideas expressed in Professor Paul Salveson's proposal(6) for the creation of a not-for-profit enterprise called Rail Cymru. As he explains, this approach would facilitate the development of a railway that was really focused on the needs of the people of Wales in a way that is not possible for a foreign owned commercial franchise.

Footnotes

1 <http://www.networkrail.co.uk/>

2 <http://www.monbiot.com/2008/12/30/the-open-veins-of-wales/>

3 Henshaw D (2013) The Great Railway Conspiracy A to B
Books Dorchester

4 <http://www.westontrack.com/>

5 Aditya Chakraborty, The Guardian, Monday, 10 June 2013

6 Rail Cymru: A People's Railway for Wales (November 2012)
[<http://www.party.coop/publications/>]

Peter Cuthbert