

INFORMED SOURCES e-Preview January 2020

As it is the start of both a new year and a new decade, this month I thought it would be appropriate to review, and preview, the key issues which I believe will preoccupy the railway industry in 2020.

Decarbonisation – carpe diem

Accessibility - hope deferred

Enhancements & renewals – radio silence

Digital Railway – seeking a national strategy

Williams – great expectations

New Train TIN-Watch

Modern Railways was covering the implications of climate change years before Rail Minister Jo Johnson launched his aspiration to 'remove all diesel-only trains' by 2040. This was a typical example of Johnson-family piffle, since it put the means before the end.

Jo-Jo's end was to reduce emissions. But other than a gross figure, neither he, nor the Department for Transport apparatchiks, who presumably provided the statistics, connected the aspiration to the impact of rail emissions on climate change.

One of the issues for 2020 will be prioritising and evaluating electrification schemes based on a project's contribution to the Government's legally binding commitment to Net-Zero Carbon by 2050. In theory, this will require putting a value on CO2 reduction.

I tried to do this last month by reverse-engineering the £3,500 grant to buyers of electric cars. That analysis, when applied to Voyagers, looked promising. Sadly, however, electric car buyers get a much better deal than industrial producers of CO2 in the UK.

If you look at Emissions Trading Systems in use around the world, the current financial value of electrification's contribution to decarbonisations is quite small. Apologise for raising hopes.

However, this does not mean that we can't use the climate emergency to support a pivot to electrification. Modal transfer will be the key and freight should be a significant opportunity.

For freight the issue is not electrification but the traction to exploit it. At the Rail Delivery Group conference at the end of October John Smith outlined the requirement. What GB Railfreight wants is a bi-mode ac electric locomotive with the performance off the wires of, say, a Class 66.

With a couple more axles to spread the load, a Co-Co could meet the specification – at a price. Scope here for Government support to get a pre-series loco built.

Is this suggestion optimistic? The Government is paying half the £18 million cost of converting a Britten- Norman Islander aircraft to electric power.

But, top priority in 2020 will be to keep electrification skills in-being south of the Border. The first task of the incoming Transport Secretary should be to authorise the continuation northwards of the Midland Main Line electrification.

Accessibility - coming to the boil

When 1 January dawns the railway industry will have invested billions on new accessible passenger vehicles and making ex-British Rail rolling stock compliant with the Persons with Reduced Mobility - Technical Specification for Interoperability (PRM-TSI). In parallel the Department for Transport has spent over £500 million on its Access for All station programmes. Another £300 million was authorised in 2018 covering a further 74 stations.

But after all this expenditure is the disabled community appreciative of the railways efforts? To judge by social media, no.

When the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 set the 2020 deadline, Mk 1 slam door stock, which was totally inaccessible, had only just been replaced. That wheelchair users would be able to board a rail vehicle, have a dedicated space to sit during the journey and have the use of a Universal Access Toilet seemed a reasonable aspiration.

However, there remains the height difference between accessible train floor and accessible platform. And, as Sir Peter Parker used to say, 'the railway tends to fall flat on its interfaces'.

Of course, there is the industry system where disabled travellers can book in advance for assistance at stations. I have been following a number of wheelchair users on social media. Their real-time reports show that booked assistance regularly fails to be in place.

And now that the railway is 'accessible' the new aspiration is to be able to 'turn-up-and-go'. This has really stressed the interface, since it assumes that there will be someone at the station, or on the train, to put the ramp in place.

A further challenge to the interface has been the rise of the mobility scooter. According to an RSSB report, Train Operating Companies have independently developed their policies on mobility scooters 'which are a by-product of the different station/platform environments, folding ramps, station staffing protocols, and rolling stock they operate'. At the time of the report (December 2017, there were 11

distinct scooter carriage policies plus six scooter permit schemes across the GB rail network.

Clearly, when set in 2005, the fixed date for the 2020 accessibility deadline overlooked interface issues, could not foresee developments in mobility technology not to mention rising aspirations. As a speaker commented at one of the Conferences, 'PRM is a minimum not a ceiling'.

Enhancements – industry concerned

On 15 October the Railway Industry Association (RIA) launched its 'Rail Enhancements Clock' showing the number of days since the Government had said it would publish its list of proposed rail upgrade projects for the new Control Period 6 (CP6). Knowing what schemes might be coming their way during the next five years is fundamental to RIA's members. It will influence business decisions ranging from investment in plant to taking on apprentices.

Now that it specifies enhancements, DfT has introduced a new approach known as the Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline (RNEP). The Pipeline has five alliterative stages: Determine, Develop, Design, Deliver and Deploy – clever, eh? At the start of each stage is a 'decision gateway'.

Under Government rules, DfT was supposed, to make the RNEP available to contractors to 'provide visibility of future prospects'. But after a year of radio silence, RIA launched the SURE campaign, as in 'Show Us the Rail Enhancements'. Still nothing; hence the 'Rail Enhancements Clock'. And the day after the clock started ticking, DfT published the RNEP!

I've got a couple of Tables in the column showing schemes in the pipeline. These are about as much use as a milk chocolate brake disc.

This lack of commitment to major enhancements is reflected in an independent RIA survey of 174 business leaders published in November. It showed that 53% did not expect the rail industry to grow in 2020, while 28% expected it to contract. When it came to the prospects for their own businesses, 39% were not expecting growth and 18% thought it likely that the volume of work would fall.

According to RIA, 'the combination of a lack of visibility and consistency in upcoming rail work, delayed decision-making on major projects like HS2, TransPennine Route Upgrade and Crossrail 2, the major industry restructuring with the Williams Rail Review and Network Rail's reorganisation, plus Brexit uncertainty, are all combining to dampen expectations for the year ahead'.

For industry to break out of the current 'bust' phase of the boom & bust cycle, early decisions on enhancements will need to be made by the new Government. But even then the glacial pace of the RNEP and GRIP processes suggest that we won't see many shovels in the ground before CP7.

Digital Railway – resignalling challenge

It is now 14 years since the decision was taken to install the European Train Control System (ETCS) on the Cambrian Line under what was called the 'Early Deployment Scheme'. Since then the only other deployment has been on the Thameslink central core.

Currently Network Rail is embroiled in legal action over the next ETCS applications – the Moorgate Branch followed by the East Coast Main Line south of Peterborough. Siemens has been chosen as the 'partner', but Alstom is challenging the contract award in the courts.

After Great Western slipped, not so much to the right as off the edge of the programme spread-sheet, ECML South was the obvious choice for the first main line ETCS roll-out. The main passenger fleets – suburban and Intercity – are ETCS fitted or ready for retro-fitting. ETCS may also help improve traffic flows through the Welwyn Viaduct bottle-neck.

But resignalling ECML South is not the issue. The real question is what happens next?

Logically, once ECML South was commissioned, say in 2024-25, ETCS would continue to roll out northward. As expertise and confidence was gained, and costs came down, the TransPennine Route upgrade would then be the next candidate, with installation running in parallel with the ECML.

However, in the absence of a National ETCS strategy, ECML South risks being a one-off. This is a nonsense and the aim must be for ETCS to be 'business as usual' when it comes to major signalling renewals from CP7 onwards.

As for Traffic Management (TM), the award of the Traffic Management Partner for the York and Manchester Rail Operating Centres, being procured as part of the ECML South Resignalling, has been deferred to the New Year. The fact that the list of qualified bidders did not include the only firm in the world with a working Integrated TM in service on Network Rail is disturbing.

Network Rail needs to get a grip on its long-term signalling and control programme. At least the framework contracts for major signalling schemes in CP6 have at last been allocated. However, as is now traditional, an unsuccessful bidder is challenging the decision.

Williams – industry positive

When the Williams Review has come up at recent conferences, senior figures in the industry seem to have a much more positive view of the likely outcomes than me.

In truth, that would not be difficult. From the announcement of the Review I have expected Williams to have much the same impact as the 30 previous rail reviews since 2006. Even so, I submitted evidence to the Review. It focused on my long standing mantra 'Structure not ownership'.

Meanwhile, old-school operator Andrew Haines can't wait for Williams and is getting on with restructuring Network Rail and devolving power to the newly named Regions. When, five decades or more ago, Michael Bonavia headlined an article in Modern Railways 'British Rail's immortal regions', the famed historian was spot on.

Also waiting for Williams, is franchising. Following DfT's defiant last hurrah of letting the West Coast Partnership, SouthEastern is in suspended animation. The Operator of Last Resort's Quick Reaction Alert team is ready to race to the rescue of Northern, although what

it could do differently is anyone's guess.

A mish-mash of management contracts, Direct Awards and old fashioned franchises fall due for renewal in the next two years. What Williams will have to say on what should replace franchising will be interesting.

However, what is exciting industry the most is the expected recommendation for a 'guiding mind' to free the industry from day-to-day Government control. This single over-arching body will oversee an integrated railway.

This is, of course, a revival of the Labour Party's short-lived Strategic Rail Authority (SRA). Having lived through the SRA era, I can't see how Williams' 'guiding mind' can avoid the inevitable conflict between the music it wants the railway pipe band to play and the Treasury which is calling the tune. And that is before finding suitably experienced people to lead and staff it.

New Train TIN-Watch

New train deliveries, or the lack of, and reliability, or lack of, are also likely to be a recurring theme of 2020.

This month we welcome the First TransPennine Express Hitachi Class 802s to the Table of Truth. Hitachi's latest customers are reaping the benefits of placing repeat orders off a hot production line. Thus the TPE bi-modes are entering service at reliability levels it has taken the GWR 802s a couple of years to achieve.

CAF's modification to the Class 331/397 traction package software seems to have cured the resonance in the 25kV traction supply that had been annoying other traction equipment (Informed Sources December 2019). The final proof came with a bravura piece of empiricism.

Six Class 331 units and two Class 397 units were connected to the line voltage at Preston. The worst case configuration for stabled units was set. Then they waited for the Caledonian Sleepers to run through the section.

Monitoring the overhead line voltage showed no low-frequency line voltage oscillation, with voltage within the normal range. And the sleeper services crossed the section without either Class 92 throwing a fit of the vapours.

Meanwhile, on Greater Anglia the Stadler Flirt Class 755 bi-modes, or 'Basils', as they are fondly known, are having a torrid time.

Trains have been failing to actuate track circuits. Greater Anglia is still insisting that 'delays and cancellations are not due to the performance or design of our new trains', but are due to 'signalling issues'. Oddly, all the other types of traction in service have been working normally, and the Anglia route has had a significantly better than usual leaf fall season.

The first sign of trouble came on 24 November when there was a very nasty near miss at a level crossing, where the gates opened as a Class 755 was approaching. According to the RAIB, the train missed a car by a quarter of a second.

RAIB says that its investigations will include the implementation and operation of the crossing's predictor system, which detects the speed of approaching trains, 'including any effects of rail head contamination due to fallen leaves'. This type of predictor needs the track circuit to be shunted by the approaching train. If actuation is lost, it assumes the train has left the section and lifts the barriers.

After that, more Class 455s failed to actuate track circuits due to leaf fall contamination. Network Rail introduced mitigation, such as double blocking and speed restrictions, which has allowed a limited service with Class 755s. In parallel a Technical Task Force is seeking the cause of the problem.

Note that in line with NR's policy of putting the passenger first, Network Rail is not waiting for a solution to the problem. Instead the Task Force has been reporting daily on progress, with the aim of being able to ease mitigation measures as the problem is better understood.

Roger's Blog

It's been a busy few weeks. The Golden Spanners production facility – aka, the Conservatory – finished the 25 trophies earlier than ever before, allowing plenty of time for the paint to harden. This meant that my presenter's notes were not being written on the day!

It was the biggest Spanners awards yet, with 400 present. There was the usual great atmosphere as we celebrated the achievements of what one senior guest called 'the doers'. This is the Depots' day with lots of rivalry and banter as the men and women at the sharp end came up to receive the awards.

After that it was head-down writing up my annual fleet reliability review, including 13 tables, some charts and a bit of visual banter from the Awards which I hope will make you chuckle. With that sent off to the editor, the last writing job before Christmas was Informed Sources.

The day before the Spanners was the Annual Rolling Stock Procurement conference organised by Waterfront. This was the fourth in the series and the line-up of speakers was the best yet. This may have been helped by the fact that the imminent General Election ruled out some government presenters. Decarbonisation was a recurring theme.

Political 'purdah' certainly affected the Rail Delivery Group's annual conference the following week. The rearranged programme featured a number of moderated panels which generally don't go into the sort of detail Modern Railways' readers demand. However, John Smith of GB Railfreight gave a forthright presentation focused on his industry's potential contribution to decarbonisation.

Looking ahead the only entry in my new diary is a media briefing with Network Rail Chief Executive Andrew Haines in mid-January. By then we might have an idea of the new government's plans for the railway, if that's not an oxymoron.

Other than that, the diary pages are pristine – but come the new year, they will fill up very quickly. Meanwhile there is plenty of research to do, not the least creating a new CP6 rolling stock delivery spread sheet.

All that remains is to wish readers a peaceful and joyous Christmas and a happy new year. With a particular word of thanks for those working over the Christmas and New Year period on the renewals and enhancements that will improve our journeys in 2020. Work and travel safely.

Roger

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