



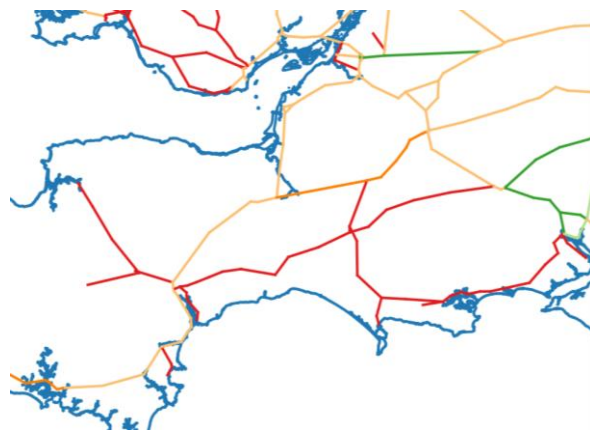
Still Here

Although we moved out of our offices at Crystal Palace station in 2023, the Railway Consultancy is very much still active in rail planning issues in Britain and elsewhere. However, the subdued nature of conditions on the railway and in the wider economy and world mean that it's some time since we last wrote to our wider group of contacts across the railway industry.

Although many economies are struggling, the British railway sector is now returning to traffic levels not seen since before the Covid pandemic, although with lower levels of business and commuting traffic, and income trailing behind passenger numbers. This is putting pressure on the finances of the rail sector and generating problems only starting to be addressed by the Great British Railways organisation and the new Government.

We are also involved in a number of private-sector rail development projects, including 'open access' proposals in Britain, and commercially-driven opportunities overseas, but unfortunately many of these remain confidential until our clients feel able to go public. At home, though, we continue to support FreightArranger in its aim of diverting domestic railfreight onto rail, but in this case would be delighted to discuss with anyone possible traffic flows we could examine. With a railfreight mode share of under 10%, and most of that in bulk goods only, there is a huge potential market share for rail – even if the practicalities of achieving it require skills such as ours.

As part of our activity to explain railfreight potential to non-railway people, we have developed a database of the national rail network, populated with information about line speeds, numbers of tracks, electrification etc. and displayable in easy-to-comprehend map format within QGIS software.



Infrastructure gauges in the SW of England

Getting in touch

If anything in this newsletter is of interest, we look forward to hearing from you – which, now the worst of the Covid pandemic is over, could of course involve meeting face-to-face, rather than by e-mail. The registered address should only be used for official documentation e.g. hard copies of contracts.

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More of the Same

Much of Britain's railway continues to function without undue fuss, under instruction from the Department of Transport. Although much publicity was recently made about the transfer of the South Western franchise into direct public ownership (joining four other operators), all the main 20 companies operate under National Rail Contracts with the DfT.

Those contracts naturally set out the number and type of train services to be run (often in quite some detail) but they also require operators to undertake other activities which may be seen as good practice, and these need to be monitored. RCL continues to work with others in two such areas, upon both of which we have previously reported, but which continue.

Train operators are required to take steps to reduce the amount of ticketless travel. A programme of on-train surveys designed by RCL is undertaken by our partners at Transport Investigations Ltd, and results entered into an app designed by us. This enables us to analyse potential journey contraventions across large samples (typically 20-30,000 per operator per quarter), and to provide the statistics that the DfT wants. More practically, it also enables to advise TOCs such as South Western and Chiltern where to send their ticket inspectors, and what types of ticketing problem are causing most problems.

Train operators are also required to maintain, if not improve, the quality of their services, in areas such as cleanliness, customer service and minor assets (such as seating, information displays etc.). Here, data collected by MSL is entered into a database managed by Transport and subject to an annual audit by RCL. This involves our randomly sampling several stations per year, comforting ourselves that the results seen match those entered into the database, double-checking the underlying data calculations and ensuring that we also come to the same result. In the financial year just completed, we carried out this work for Avanti West Coast, Chiltern and South Western.

...and Something Entirely Different

The country of Armenia has had a troubled history and currently only has one of its land borders (that with Georgia) open for crossing. In 2022, however, the incoming President set out a vision of 'a Crossroads for Peace', with various international traffic flows potentially traversing the country. A study to examine the transport implications of this (particularly at border crossings) was therefore proposed, funded by USAID, and won by TetraTech, with RCL support for its rail elements.

RCL undertook a wide range of site visits, met with local rail operator South Caucasus Railways and analysed the existing capacity of the existing, mostly single-track network. We translated demand forecasts from TetraTech colleagues into a need for more train paths, and evaluated the potential capacity of the network to accommodate these. We then worked with TetraTech to identify a phased programme of both strategic and smaller-scale interventions which would address the expected future demands. Unfortunately, the project was terminated early because of cuts to the USAID budget, but we hope that our inputs to the Armenian Government had already been useful by then. There are currently only about 6 return passenger, and 6 return freight train services in the whole country – which provides huge opportunities for development. And, as the train on which we travelled between Yerevan and Gyumri was older than any of the members of staff, plenty of opportunities for modernisation too!



Much of Armenia is dominated by Mount Ararat – including this view from Mrgashat station

Bottlenecks

RCL continues to support the benchmarking work undertaken by the Transport Strategy Centre at London's Imperial College. This includes the sharing of data and joint undertaking of research studies by groups of similar railways, ranging from bigger and smaller metros to regional and national operators, in order to achieve best practice. One recent study with which we were asked to assist aimed to understand the problems and potential solutions to bottlenecks in national rail networks. Railways supporting the study comprised the national railways of Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands and Ireland, together with Vline from Australia. RCL provided a review of the academic literature on the subject, some operational research surveys from the Welwyn viaduct area of Britain's East Coast Main Line, technical analysis of actual train path availability (which was not always the same as that claimed by infrastructure managers!) and some recommendations as to the quantity and distribution of slack time on the railways concerned.



The infamous Welwyn viaduct

Luton DART counts

As well as mainline passenger and freight companies, RCL also supports other rail operators, some of whom carry a considerable amount of traffic, even if only over short distances. One such system in Britain is the 2.3-km long airport shuttle at Luton, the Luton DART. Interchanging with mainline rail services at Luton Airport Parkway station, the automated rail service gets passengers and airport staff alike up to/down from the airport on the edge of the town.



Rail traffic to Luton Airport has been boosted by faster trains e.g. to/from Kettering as well as London

However, railways such as these still have many of the same commercial needs as bigger networks. For instance, passengers' origins and destinations, their journey purposes and the number of passengers travelling together are all key items of data needed to support a commercial and pricing strategy. Working with colleagues at Transport Investigations Ltd, we organised and analysed the results from a market research exercise during 2024, to provide that management information. The study also involved giving advice as to the best ways of presenting service satisfaction scores on a railway which performs highly across nearly all aspects of its service.

Consultancy Contacts

The Railway Consultancy provides services across areas such as demand forecasting, operational planning, strategy and business development; for more details see our website www.railwayconsultancy.com.

If you want to contact specific members of staff, please use the e-mail convention:
firstname.secondname@railwayconsultancy.com
Individual staff may provide their mobile phone numbers for ongoing contact; however, given his commitments in giving training courses, Dr Harris would like his to be used for texts only please.

Publications

Still available from www.anharris.co.uk: "Designing and Maintaining the Urban Railway" and "An Introduction to Railway Operational Planning". An up-dated version of "Wheel: Rail Interface" is (hopefully!) nearing publication.

