

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

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

Dear Mr. Black,

Because you never replied to my letter a few years ago, I wrote a piece for my web pages which was mostly conjectural. I quote:-

"Mr. Black is not alone: in authorities across the land, "old school" or "class of 1970" men like him do the same jobs. They must do their work well and to the complete satisfaction of their masters; maybe they do all that the dreary consensus will allow."

"It would surprise me to find that Dave Black was a man who did not like his car, even that he was not an enthusiastic driver who took great pride in his vehicle. I would guess that he learnt to drive very quickly after coming of age and that a car has been at the centre of his being ever since. I doubt that there has been any point in his private or professional life that he has had the slightest misgiving about modern *motopia*."

In this I would dearly wish to be proven wrong; to find that within the straitjacket there was a revolutionary anxious to turn the world around.

The piece was not a personal attack and though I am often fiercely critical I avoid being insulting to individuals.

In explaining the relevance of my approach to you, I gave a brief historical context:-

"One of Devon County Council's original functions was the construction and maintenance of roads and bridges. Who could have predicted in the late 19th century that Devon's road system would grow to 8,721 miles – a greater mileage than any other county and indeed Belgium – and that much of it would be traversed by fast and heavy motor traffic? Men who have held the equivalent of Mr. Black's post down through the years have been natural road builders.

"Some responsibility for public transport provision was borne much later, when the rise in car ownership began to hit bus services. Now the county council heavily subsidises local bus and train services. A rural bus passenger may pay only a small part of the cost of his journey, while the county is prepared to underwrite the summer Sunday trains from Exeter to Okehampton to the extent that £25 is rumoured to be paid for each passenger."

When writing the above, I had forgotten that the county actually had some much earlier involvement with public transport provision. Even before the First World War, Devon County Council had pledged £15,000, later upped to £40,000, towards the construction of the line between Torrington and Halwill Junction, the quaint North Devon & Cornwall Junction Light, the last railway to open in Devon.

Were it not for your involvement in railway development I would probably have little inclination to write to you. My view, with which I feel certain the verdict of history will concur, is that the railway should be a unified organization capable of acting to a very large degree like any commercial undertaking, sharply focussed on its interests and trading position. It should be free to promote and expand its transport and associated businesses, and to press for its proper place and purpose in a changing world. It should not be at the mercy of government whims or short term planning, or be beholden to a gaggle of "stakeholders," or have to be advised by watchdogs and pressure groups, or have to suffer in silence the carping of critics.

Of course, under what might be called the "railway covenant," in return for the great advantages given from the start to the transport system, not least its private estate, there must be acceptance of great responsibility. Demanding the freedom of a normal business would not mean that there is a desire for a slackening of the over-arching power of the legislature or an end to liaison with local authorities, or a reduction in co-operation and cohesion at every level and in every area.

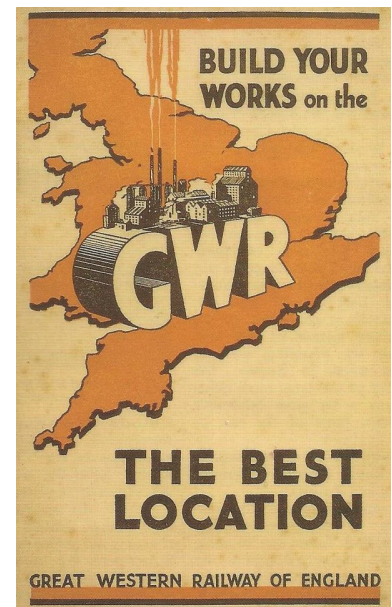
In short, a conventionally constituted railway would give the best service and would do so without the interference from every quarter that it labours under today.

The pretence of an organization that has existed for over twenty years is now so controlled by government that scarcely the only influence of private enterprise is on ephemeras like the vinyl wrapping of trains and the style of uniforms.

To throw into contrast the dynamism of earlier times and the sluggish pace or mired lethargy of the present, I have taken to describing what may have happened at Marsh Barton, had its development taken place, say, in the inter-war years.

Assuming that the siting of the trading estate had not for some reason been determined by the proximity of rail transport, and that railway facilities in the form of a new freight yard and possibly private sidings for the larger manufacturers and traders were not planned in the first instance, then railway managers would have soon become aware of the potential for traffic. In fact all employees at the time were encouraged to be on the alert for changes which might give rise to new revenue opportunities.

Even as the estate was growing, commercial managers would have been eyeing the patterns of travel of the workforce and maybe the customers. A petition may have come forth from a traders' chamber or from the city council. In due course, if it were felt that a halt on the main line could be justified, then a proposal would have been put together and presented to the Great Western board of directors, who would have considered it along with a pile of other proposed investments and renewals. The case would have been accompanied by what today would be seen as the flimsiest forecasting of demand and by an estimate from the engineer based on something similar he had recently done.



Rubber-stamped by the board within the month, along with approvals for new works of all kinds across the system, the engineer would probably have had a two-platform wooden halt with the most basic furniture and access finished in less than eight weeks. It may have been sited so as to take advantage of the footpath underpass, or at Clapperbrook Lane Bridge, with the continuing expansion of the estate in mind. Depending on its usage, the halt may have been improved and its train service adjusted over time.

How did it come to pass that this kind of responsive action, which would have been seen certainly up to 1947 and quite likely into the early years of nationalization, has been reversed so that you, as an officer of the county council, have become the driving force and the railway – if any loose organization can be identified which approximates to the title – is for the most part obstructive, or clearly non-expansionist by nature?

The economy of using Clapperbrook Lane as the passenger footbridge, including a ramped approach for the disabled, you will no doubt tell me is not possible because of the weight of traffic using it. When I was young it carried next to no traffic; Double Locks wasn't the destination it is now and when I followed a freighter down the canal on my bike the only other people I saw were anglers. Now when I ride over what is left of the lane at this end, I am likely to meet a huge four-by-four carrying a couple of bikes on the back or a station wagon with dogs staring through the rear window. The whole area around the swing bridge with the dimpled deck is often littered with cars, most of them I suspect driven by people who have only come a short distance from home.

Do you know how much traffic is generated by abstract cyclists going to start a safe, off-road ride and by dog owners visiting their favourite walking grounds twice a day?

The difference in cost between constructing a halt at Marsh Barton under closed-off building site conditions and doing so on an operational railway has become vast. It is hard to see more than £1-million-worth of work in the simple fabric of a modern halt, yet the estimate has grown from £4- to £7- to £13-million and most of the excess must be put down to what I call "industry loading;" the same industry whose members will start collecting fares the moment the halt opens.

Should the cost rise to the point that the B.C.R. falls below one, I wonder if the scheme will be dropped or is it now to be built, like "Pete's Pool," at any cost?

Returning to the inter-war years, the same railway that managed to replace the girders of the approach spans of the Royal Albert Bridge between trains would not have "loaded" the task of building a wayside halt.

If I can avoid it, I seldom drive any further than Marsh Barton. I park my little truck in trade premises where I am known and cycle around the city and beyond. A few weeks ago for example, it being a lovely day, I rode to Thorverton, ate some lunch on the green, followed the back road with its wonderful views to Bickleigh and returned to the estate to make a few more calls before closing time. "Active travel," it is being called, as if it had just been discovered. I have been doing it all my life and it is all I know.

It is a pity that men like you who are surrounded by others of like opinion and viewpoint, do not occasionally spend time with dissidents, just to hear their ideas and look from their angles. I review my own position constantly and welcome challenges to it as useful tests. In my

experience, beyond a certain age, through familiarity and convenience, most men get stuck in a rut of thinking from which no reason or appeal will lift them.

Despite being so critical, I cling to the hope that you might favour me with a reply as an exercise in defending your stand. Partly to prove that I hold no grudge, I have obtained from *Railfuture* and enclose two books that I hope you will find interesting, even if you only dip briefly into them. They are intended for you personally but I would be happy if you chose to place them in the department's reference library, if there still is such an old-fashioned resource.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Burges

Encl.

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26<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Dear Mr Burges

Thank you for your letter of 31 May and I note the contents therein. I would like to thank you on a personal note for the two books you have gifted as resources for our library.

Yours sincerely



Dave Black  
Head of Planning, Transportation & Environment