

The nationalised railway lets us down

I am still getting complaints about late and cancelled trains. I was sorry to see how many people were left stranded by a failure of the overhead power system on Great Western yesterday. Network Rail has decided to spend a lot of money on changing over to overhead electrical current to power the trains, but this leaves the system more vulnerable to accidents and to adverse weather doing damage to the power supply, with knock on effects to many trains.

My own recent experiences reinforces the view that there are problems.

I went to Yorkshire to speak two weeks ago, and to Cornwall last week. All four trains were around half an hour late. Most of the delays seemed to come from Network Rail issues, the fully nationalised part of the railway.

The train to Yorkshire was delayed by half an hour at Kings Cross owing to an unexplained incident to the north of London which delayed all Kings Cross departures. The train from Reading to Cornwall was delayed by a tree on the line. The train back to London from Yorkshire was delayed by slow trains ahead, with Network Rail unable to provide track capacity for a faster train. The train from Cornwall to Reading also fell foul of slower trains as well as service delays owing to quite high winds.

Why can't Network put in more passing places? Why can't they accelerate digital signalling to provide more train paths and instant re routing where possible and necessary?

It is true some of the train companies also have problems. GWR have recently acquired expensive new Hitachi trains to adapt to an expensive and partial electrification by Network Rail. My recent journey had no reservations on seats. I was told by two staff members that the GWR and Hitachi seat systems don't work together. The new trains have to have several heavy diesel engines to generate power to run on the lines that are not electrified. This entails a double energy loss, once on power generation and once from the electric motors. This loss is presumably bigger than the double loss on using power station power from electric overheads where available, as the on board generators are likely to be less efficient than a large power station. The need for two forms of energy to turn the electric motors is an added burden on the train operating companies from the actions of Network Rail. As much of the power station power comes from fossil fuels and all the diesel generator power comes from fossil fuel it is difficult to see the environmental win from this development.

GWR also often runs two five car train sets joined together which makes an odd train with no ability to walk from the front five to the back five whilst staying on the train. Passengers complain that the seats are less comfortable than the 125 diesels they are replacing.