

# Slow Train Coming

## The Case for Rebuilding the Railways - by Andy Wilson

**T**rains capture the romantic imagination in a way that often hides their sheer usefulness. Without trains, the industrial revolution would have been delayed by anything up to half a century. While one might argue if that were the case, humanity wouldn't be in the mess it is in now, it can also be said that railways played an integral role in the transition from feudal times into the modern-day nation state.

In Ireland's case, the development of the railways allowed for the opening up of considerable areas of countryside hitherto only accessible on foot or by horse. The railways facilitated the transportation of goods between producer regions, population centres and ports. Later, they enabled the mass transit of people to their places of work. In the decades that followed the building of the first line between Dublin and Kingstown (now Dun Laoghaire) in 1834, the railways expanded rapidly, and by the end of the 19th century there was 5600 km of railtrack on the island of Ireland.

## The 20th Century

**I**n 1913, the number of passenger journeys totalled some 31 million, while some 6 million tonnes of freight was carried. Impressive as these figures are, there is no question the railways were relatively underutilised and a number of lines were running at a loss. The railway network in Ireland had expanded in a chaotic manner, with a number of different-gauge tracks being used and very little attempt at coordination between different operators.

As late as 1920, there were 26 different railway companies in Ireland, ranging from the Great Southern Railway with its 1800 km of track, to tiny ones like Baltimore Railway, which owned a mere 12.5 km. As far back as 1865, there was an active movement pressing for Ireland to follow the example of some continental European countries and nationalise the railways.

In 1944, the Great Southern Railway joined up with Dublin United Transport to form C oras Iompair  ireann

(CIE), which was then nationalised in 1950. In Northern Ireland, the railways were nationalised in 1948 and became the responsibility of the Ulster Transport Authority until the late 1960s, when a new state body, Northern Ireland Railways, took over.

Although the railways in Ireland proved far more economically viable than the canals, they suffered a similar fate to the waterways once motorised road transport began to take off in earnest. The railways in Ireland declined right up till recent years, and the serviceable network now stands at about 2000 km, about 80 percent of which is in the Republic.

In the last two decades rail passenger numbers have risen slightly, mainly as a result of better suburban services. However, the tripling in the quantity of fuel used by motorists since 1990 confirms the growing popularity of the car. The volume of freight moved by road has also tripled in the same period, while the amount travelling by rail has halved. According to SEI, less than 2 percent of freight in Ireland is now moved by rail (1).



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## Missed Opportunities

In 1978 there was serious debate about how to best improve Ireland's ailing rail transport infrastructure. At a presentation on National Transport Policy given by economist Peter Hall to the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, it was argued that the development of the railways for freight was desirable because "the movement of such traffic by road can only increase infrastructural investment costs and increase congestion, environmental noise, pollution and energy conservation problems."

Hall also recommended the establishment of priority bus lanes and good cross-city bus services in Dublin, stating that "the disadvantages of public transport usage should be minimised by linking cross-city bus routes and by providing adequate bus shelter and terminal facilities."

Other speakers at the debate argued that investment in public transport should also be directed at the establishment of a rapid-transit rail system for Dublin and suburban rail services in Cork.

As we now know, it took several more decades before dedicated bus lanes were finally introduced to Dublin, while a suburban rail system serving Cork city has yet to become a reality. The small capital expenditure on railways compared to expenditure on roads is reflected in the varying fortunes of the two transport systems. Spending on railways has rarely been at a level much above the bare minimum to keep the system operational, while spending on roads has permitted a massive expansion of the trunk road network.

## A Viable Transport Option

In spite of the burgeoning expenditure on roads, there is very little to suggest that current levels of road usage will last much longer. Already, congestion, rising fuel prices and other charges like motor insurance and motorway tolls are acting as a major disincentive to the motorist.

In order to facilitate both local and international trade, and to enable the citizens of the country to travel to where they need to get to, Ireland will need a properly functioning, integrated transport infrastructure.



In an oil-scarce future, it certainly can't be one based primarily on cars and road freight. In the previous issue of Sustainability, I wrote about the impossibility of Europe producing even one tenth of its transport fuels (at current levels of usage) from biofuels, in spite of EU policy being clearly directed towards that target.

In the last six months however, the insanity and futility of this EU aspiration have become ever more self evident, as the growing demand for ethanol has helped push food prices to all time highs and has caused immeasurable suffering across the globe.

In Ireland however, biofuels are still being promoted at official level as a solution to the unsustainable demand for imported fossil fuels. In 2006, the level of penetration by biofuels of the home transport sector had risen to a truly awesome 0.05 percent, or about one litre for every 2000 litres of transport fuel consumed. While it was up on the 0.02 percent of the previous year, Irish

government targets of a 5.75 percent biofuel penetration by 2010 look completely out of touch with reality. In any case, it begs the question: Where will the remaining 94 percent come from?

Transporting goods and people by rail – where technically feasible – requires far less energy than transporting good and people by road. A detailed study by Alexander Bos (2) suggested the difference could be as much as a factor of 4 or 5. In addition, the energy needed to build and maintain railways and rolling stock is less than that needed to construct roads and road vehicles of a similar carrying capacity.

Another decided advantage of rail is its potential ability to utilise electricity for power. Electrification would permit off-peak grid surpluses to be used for moving freight at night and at other times when national electricity demand was low. While electricity can also be used to propel cars, the need to use batteries as an energy source severely limits the operating range of larger road freight

# IRISH RAILWAYS

## EXISTING & PROPOSED



vehicles. However, this might not be an issue for small local delivery vans or shuttle buses working in conjunction from depots at railways and adjacent to canal docks. This underscores the need for transport integration.



## Expanding the Network

Some of the lines that operated in Ireland in the past would not be viable today owing to demographic or economic changes, but conversely, there may be a demand for a rail link where one never previously existed.

An example of this is the west coast between Sligo and Ballyshannon. This would be a natural extension to the Limerick to Sligo line and could be linked into a new railway from Ballyshannon to Strabane.

This extended western rail corridor would be a vital part of any new rail network in Ireland. If connected onto Letterkenny and Derry, it would place over 600,000 people within walking or cycling distance of a railway station serving a full length west coast line running from Cork to the Foyle. Many more people live within the operating range of a shuttle bus serving stations.

Various other cross-border lines could prove viable. These include a line from Strabane down through Omagh and Enniskillen to Clones and Dundalk, and a line connecting Clones, Monaghan, Armagh and Portadown.

Within Northern Ireland, the line to Downpatrick and Ardglass would be a valuable addition to the network, while in the Republic, campaigners have long called for suburban lines within Cork city and the reopening of the lines from Cork to Youghal, Kinsale, Bantry and Skibbereen. An independent feasibility study for the West Cork line was carried out in 2005 (3).

Elsewhere in the Republic, the reopening of the Navan to Dublin line, although much talked about in the Dáil, still remains an aspiration. Had it been carried out ten years ago, it would have probably saved the Hill of Tara from the M3 motorway and €1 billion into the bargain. The reopening of the link between Athlone and Mullingar would also be a valuable addition to the network.

## Slow Progress

In 2003, the Limerick to Ennis line, which had only seen a skeleton service for the previous 20 years, was upgraded and now enjoys eight trains a day each way. The Irish government has also committed to reopening the continuation of the old Sligo line – now known as the Western Rail Corridor – from Ennis as far as Athenry by 2009.

According to the Transport 21 website, however, it will take an additional two years to extend the line the extra 25 km to Tuam and another three after that to make it a further 25 km to Claremorris in Mayo. The original line was built far more quickly with the pick and shovel in the late 19th century! At such snail like progress, a link to Sligo seems decades away.

Proceeding at a faster speed than the line to Claremorris is the reopening of the Cork to Middleton line, scheduled for completion in 2009. While this will be part of a new and improved rail service in the greater Cork area, it nevertheless represents a missed opportunity to extend the line further eastwards from Middleton to Youghal.

## Vision

In order to move forward, it is necessary to accept the reality of the depletion of key resources and acknowledge that population demographics are likely to change enormously in the next 20 to 30 years. For example: the growth witnessed in the greater Dublin area is simply not sustainable. Even supplying water to meet its population's demand will be problematic, never mind food and energy.

In the next quarter century, most new employment opportunities are likely to be outside of the greater Dublin and Belfast areas. The pressing need to reduce energy use will quite naturally hasten the evolution towards decentralisation and local economies. People will move 'beyond the Pale' on a scale witnessed rarely, if ever, in the past.

Without the right national transport infrastructure, however, Ireland's post-oil society will struggle. A new enlarged railway network is a vital component of a sustainable future and will be essential for the transportation of people, bulk foodstuffs, timber, fuel, manufactured products and waste for recycling.

Equally important will be the rebuilding of the Irish steel industry -albeit in a more localised form - in order to meet the future requirements for railtrack and rolling stock. While indigenous iron ores may be insufficient to meet the demand for raw materials, Ireland potentially has enough scrap ferrous metals to last till the next century. Think cars.

For dreams of a more sustainable future to become a reality, however, the political mindset needs to change. That remains the biggest challenge of all.



Not opening any time soon - the western rail link to Sligo . Photo: Kiltimagh, Co. Mayo

### Footnotes

- (1) SEI Energy in Transport 2007
- (2) Direction indirect: the indirect energy requirements and emissions from freight transport, Alexandra Bos, University of Groningen (1998).
- (3) West Cork Rail, Brian Guckian This very detailed study makes some excellent recommendations. Brian also points out the need for pedestrian and cyclist friendly railway stations, something which the Dutch take for granted but in Ireland are an alien concept. Brian has carried out research on a number of other rail routes. Some of his studies will be posted on the Sustainability website.

