

FROM TRUCK TO TRACK

Plans are afoot to adapt a disused freight line from Manchester to Sheffield to allow trains to shuttle lorries along it, thereby keeping them off the roads. But will there be enough political support for it? Alan Whitehouse investigates

Suddenly, the talk is not about the cost of running the railway any more. The talk is about growing the railway instead. But how might that happen? The industry has traditionally thought about growing the railway in terms of reversing the Beeching (and other) cuts, by relaying half-forgotten routes that campaign groups insist should never have closed.

Railway lines are re-opening in Scotland, and the thinking is very largely along the lines of: here's a piece of infrastructure that was hastily closed as a short-term economy that could now serve a far more useful purpose than it ever did when it was open first time around. Fine as far

as it goes, but this is a strand of thinking that could lead into a dead end. Markets change – that's why many lines closed in the first place – so simply replacing them might not be the best use of either a line of route or the money needed to bring it back to life.

All of which leads nicely on to the Woodhead Line, the Manchester-Sheffield route that closed 25 years ago. Built to carry coal from Yorkshire to the industries of Lancashire, it was a line whose reason for existing had essentially disappeared. Now, here's a new scheme to re-open the line. And one that really tests the idea set out in the Railway Forum's paper on big-project infrastructure investment that *Rail*

Professional looked at in July.

A small company called Translink UK wants the line rebuilt, not as a conventional railway, but as a rolling road, a dedicated shuttle for heavy goods vehicles as a means of decongesting the parallel road through the Peak District National Park.

Rolling roads are not a new idea. Several operate successfully in continental Europe, notably through the Alps on the Swiss-German border. The Swiss insisted on finding a method of taking long distance lorry movements off its overstretched Alpine roads when the federal government belatedly realised that its citizens were getting all the disadvantages of the ceaseless flow of heavy road traffic, but seeing none of the benefits – the goods were not destined for Swiss consumers.

The Eurotunnel shuttles are another example of a rolling road in action. Would the same idea work at the Woodhead Pass? There are some good parallels. The Swiss took action to protect countryside and communities. There is a similar problem along Longdendale, part of which lies in the Peak Park. The road – the A628/A616 – carries a heavy flow of HGV traffic and is frequently congested.

There are environmental concerns too. The national park should be a haven of peace and tranquillity. The A628 is neither.

Yet it is almost impossible to find anyone who believes that Translink UK faces anything but an uphill struggle. The company says it wants to spend £159m on relaying about 35 miles of track, creating a link between the M67 at Hattersley, on the outskirts of Manchester and close to the M60, and the M1 at Tinsley, on the outskirts of Sheffield.

Trains of simple flat wagons adapted to carry HGVs and hauled by what Translink calls 'remanufactured' locomotives – possibly redundant Class 58s – would shuttle between the two points. The Woodhead Tunnel itself,



Trucks load onto an Arbel-type Eurotunnel truck shuttle to be transported underneath the Channel.



Rolling roads already operate through the Channel Tunnel (above) and in parts of Switzerland. The proposed Woodhead Line would keep lorries off roads in the Peak District.

built as recently as 1954, would carry lowered tracks to enable lorries to piggyback on the flat wagons while not exceeding the loading gauge.

Translink claims its fare, or toll, would be cheaper than simply running the lorry over the same journey: fuel, wear and tear and time saved would more than cancel out the cost of the road trip and it is this that will tempt hauliers to use the shuttle. The company says it can attract 90 per cent of current HGV traffic off the road and onto its shuttle.

So here's the big question: is it feasible? Followed by: would it work? The answers, perhaps surprisingly, are 'yes' and 'quite possibly'.

Two important pieces of research work suggest there are no engineering barriers to re-opening the line. About four years ago Arriva proposed re-opening it as part of a grandiose bid for the Trans-Pennine Express franchise. A survey of the line reached the conclusion that there were no major problems with the line of route. A bypass has breached it at Stocksbridge, near Sheffield, while work on a reservoir at Crowden in Longdendale has encroached on the former trackbed.

Arriva's survey claimed that both issues could be dealt with. In addition, bridges would need rebuilding. Beyond that, it would simply be a case of building a new railway, one that would link Manchester with Sheffield in 35 minutes, compared to the current 59 via the Hope Valley.

About 10 years before that, work on using the line as a rolling road was carried out as part of a much wider survey of west-east freight links between the north of England and Europe. Interestingly, the conclusions were that re-opening Woodhead as a conventional railway were no more than a railway enthusiast's pipedream, but re-opening it as a rolling road had serious possibilities.

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So why do so few people believe Translink UK has any real chance of pulling it off? Mostly because rolling roads do not just need money. They need political will too. The Alpine rolling roads work because the politicians were looking for a solution to a specific problem and the road haulage industry was told to learn to love the shuttle trains. There are no similar compunctions here. Road haulage companies are always suspicious of anything that they think might cost them more money – they operate in a climate that's tough to the point of being cut-throat. Few of them would want to be first to fork out their rail fares only to see rivals who chose to carry on using the 'free' A628 road undercut them.

But our Government is now in the middle of some serious long term thinking about the future of the railway industry. Alistair Darling himself said so shortly before leaving the transport brief behind. And the Department for Transport is showing itself to be in an innovative frame of mind: car-sharing lanes on motorways; peak-time traffic lights on slip roads; experiments with road tolling.

In this climate, to Switzerland or Germany a project like the Woodhead line would be seen as an obvious quick win that decongested a road, improved a national park and maybe even cut the cost of operating road transport. And it would be a way of demonstrating that old railway lines may have some innovative uses that their original builders could never have foreseen.

But not in Britain. As part of the planning process for a new bypass around a string of villages blighted by heavy road congestion, the Highways Agency says it looked at the lorry shuttle option – and rejected it in favour of a new road. That's either common sense or, as Dr Rana Roy contends (*Rail Professional*, July), down to the fact that we British deliberately overstate the risks and understate the benefits of big public infrastructure projects in action.

Who's right? You decide.

Alan Whitehouse is transport correspondent for BBC North.