special issue

brief

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THE WOODHEAD ROUTE –the facts

For several months there has been a critical campaign in the media about British Rail's plans to slim the excess capacity provided by the four railway routes across the Pennines between Yorkshire and Lancashire. Until now, Management has been unable to respond to this speculation because of agreements with the Trade Unions that internal discussions must precede public announcements.
Internal debate has been going on for the past 18 months at Trade Union National level and is not yet completed. Nevertheless, it is felt that because of speculation, much of it ill-informed, it is time for the facts of the situation to be made known to the interested public so that at least a great deal of the uncertainty can be dispelled.

The case for reducing excess rail capacity is being put this month by Eastern and London Midland Regions to Staff, Local Authorities, Passenger Transport Executives and other interested parties. The full text of an audio-visual presentation being used for this purpose is reproduced here, together with some of the illustrations, for the interest of those Managers who may be called upon to discuss it with members of their own staff.

FREIGHT - CAUSE FOR CONCERN

In the Annual Report for 1978, which he described as "a year of success and strain" Sir Peter Parker, Chairman of British Railways Board, warned: "The longer term challenges are here and now, and undeniable. The development of a national strategy for reducing costs and improving railway service lies at the heart of our industrial problems."

And commenting on the first half of 1979, against the background of a £10 million loss in that period, Sir Peter emphasised that the financial outlook for British Rail's freight business was giving cause for concern. He said "Improved efficiency and greater competitiveness are central to the task of meeting our financial obligations. The situation calls for every avenue or opportunity of improving our cost-effectiveness to be explored. A breakthrough in the freight business is top priority".

From the end of 1977 all subsidies for the railway's freight business were withdrawn. Freight is now under an unequivocal Government direction to pay its way. And the freight business has to pay the full costs of the track and signalling on every mile of railway route which is used solely for freight traffic. Track and signalling, alone, cost British Rail £475 million in 1978, and £95 million of this had to be borne by the freight business.

Efficiency must be improved. Costs must be reduced. A significant contribution must be made by reducing the excessive and costly over-capacity provided by maintaining all the railway routes across the Pennines. Every pound lost in retaining unprofitable railway facilities is a pound lost for investing in the future of the industry.

OVER CAPACITY

The bleak Pennines are pierced by four railway routes, a legacy from inter-company rivalries dating back more than a century when railways could exploit the monopoly they held in transport. But it is a very different kind of railway today.

The four routes are: The HEBDEN BRIDGE route, which links Bradford with Manchester Victoria by Halifax and Todmorden; the DIGGLE line, joining Leeds with Manchester Victoria by Huddersfield, Greenfield and Stalybridge; the WOODHEAD route, now a freight-only line for much of its length; and the HOPE VALLEY route, which runs from Sheffield to Manchester Piccadilly via Dore and New Mills.

As at May 1979, the total capacity of the routes is 360 westbound trains a day. The maximum daily requirement is for 154 trains - a surplus movement capability for a further 206 trains a day. More westbound trains are needed because of the movement of coal - the reverse flow of empty wagons requires fewer eastbound trains. Of the 154 westbound trains, up to 78 are passenger and 76 are freight trains. Most of the passenger trains, because of the stations they serve and the conditions of financial support, cannot be transferred and must be confined to their existing routes - the Hebden Bridge, Diggle and Hope Valley lines. These routes taken together, also carry 37 westbound freight trains daily but still have an overall surplus capacity which could accommodate 125 more trains a day.

The only line which does not carry any passenger trains at all over its main length is the Woodhead route which, between Penistone and Hadfield, is used entirely for freight. The Woodhead route could carry 120 trains per day but only 39 trains at most use it, leaving a surplus capability of moving 81 more trains on this one line, the greatest surplus capacity of any of the four routes. Moreover, the

traffic over this route is bound to fall - and every study shows that there is no potential whatsoever for winning more business to sustain it.

Look at the facts. All three of the other lines - Hebden Bridge, Diggle, and Hope Valley connect and serve centres of population along their routes. Some of these towns are in themselves important centres of commerce and the passenger services on all three routes are supported by grants, either local or national, for their maintenance.

The Woodhead route lies across the most barren part of the landscape, and the most sparsely populated part of the Pennine areas. Passenger trains do not run any more - and there is no potential for reinstating them.

THE MOVEMENT OF COAL

The main traffic carried over the Woodhead route today is bulk coal for Fidlers Ferry power station. The coal is no longer entirely local. Only eight collieries are left in the Wath area. When the yard was built in 1907, it served 40 mines. By 1981, the collieries served by Wath will number at most 4.

National Coal Board intentions of concentrating coal output from collieries in the area to Wooley, Grimethorpe and Houghton Main will mean that starting points for coal traffic will move away from Wath and the Woodhead route, and will be better moved by Healey Mills Marshalling Yard, and the Diggle line.

In any case, there are also sound indications that less coal will cross the Pennines in future. Coal supplies becoming available to the West of the Pennines, are likely to become the major sources of supply for Fiddlers Ferry. On the east side of the Pennines, the construction of the new power station at Drax 'B', will increase the demand from the Aire Valley Power Stations to around 17 million tons per annum, and absorb much of the production of the new Selby Coalfield.

TRAIN OPERATIONS

These developments will result in the already grossly under-utilised Woodhead route carrying even less traffic, and escalate the costs of its very inefficient working, especially in the use of locomotives.

Most trains have to change locomotives, many of them twice. Extra locomotives are also needed because parts of the route are very steep indeed. This is particularly true of the Worsborough Branch where a train of 30 Merry-go-Round wagons has to be hauled by two electric locomotives in front, with two more banking in the rear, to climb the severe gradient. Many eastbound trains also need extra locomotives for braking.

The shortness of the electrified system in the middle of the Woodhead route produces poor locomotive and crew utilisation. The service is also vulnerable to unplanned delays at each stage of the journey, waiting locomotives and crews to return from previous workings. The present changeover from diesel to electric traction and vice-versa is wasteful in terms of men and machines.

Using the Diggle route, for example, a similar coal train could be hauled by one Class 56 diesel locomotive. This would give a round trip time of about six hours, compared with nine hours from Wath via Woodhead. There is potential for working with at least two sets of wagons less than at present, very possibly fewer even than that.

ELECTRIFICATION

Electrification of the Woodhead route was planned in 1936 and work began in 1939. It continued after the war and was completed in 1954. At the time, its 1500 volt D.C. system was thought to be the forerunner of a national network. But before the scheme was completed, French Railways had experimented with a new A.C. system of great promise. British Rail took up the new system, proved it to be cheaper and more efficient and, in 1956, adopted it for future electrification schemes. The outdated system still in use on the Woodhead route is the only one of its kind left on a main line in Britain. Modern electric locomotives and trains such as those used on the West Coast Main Line from London, Euston to Manchester and Glasgow, cannot run on it, and the Woodhead locomotives cannot be used elsewhere.

To convert the Woodhead route to the modern 25,000 volt A.C. system would cost in excess of £24m. Many millions of this would be needed to replace the signalling as this is of an old type which would not work with A.C. electrification.

Locomotives and trains for the new system would cost another £20m. Such vast sums of money could never be justified in view of the complete lack of any prospect for developing the Woodhead route.

Why, you might ask, should British Rail in a worsening world energy situation, be even considering the withdrawal of any railway services? Clearly, on the grounds of capacity alone, we could be here today talking about cutting out not one but two of the four routes across the Pennines.

P.T.E. SUPPORT

It is fact, however, that three of the routes carry substantial passenger traffic and are supported by Passenger Transport Executives on both sides of the Pennines. And there are prospects for development on each of the three routes.

Local passenger trains on the Hebden Bridge route are supported west of the Pennines by the Greater Manchester P.T.E. as far as Littleborough. East of the Pennines the West Yorkshire P.T.E. supports trains to Todmoden.

In view of the revenue from through services and P.T.E. support, British Rail could not propose to the Minister that services should be withdrawn.

Moreover, closure of the route would mean that all freight using it would be diverted to the Diggle route. Traffic amounting to about 350,000 tons of oil and coal moving annually to the Preston Division would then incur considerably more mileage equal to not less than one hour's extra running time per train. Clearly, this line should be retained.

The Diggle route is seven miles shorter than Hebden Bridge and serves the important intermediate station of Huddersfield. Greater Manchester P.T.E. supports local trains to Greenfield and West Yorkshire P.T.E. finances services as far as Marsden.

This important Inter-City route links Liverpool and Manchester with the main cities of West Yorkshire, North-east England and Humberside via Leeds within the framework of the Public Service Obligation. This means that both local and long-distance trains receive financial backing at national and local level.

The Diggle route is the most suitable for long-term development.

A first stage was the introduction last May of significant improvements in the quality of train services using it. These are aimed at improving reliability of service and passenger comfort generally. A vigorous publicity and advertising campaign is contributing to a sizeable traffic increase. Independent Consultants have identified potential for even more passenger business between Leeds and Manchester.

The Diggle is the fastest and more direct route through the Pennines. If it were closed, Huddersfield would be deprived of a through rail service and both passenger and freight traffic on the Manchester/West Yorkshire axis would suffer longer and more costly transits. No grounds whatsoever can be found for eliminating this route.

Next, the Hope Valley route. After the withdrawal of passenger trains via Woodhead in 1970, a through service from Sheffield to Manchester was introduced by the Hope Valley, which is two miles shorter, enabling the concentration of passenger services at Sheffield on Midland station.

Local trains between Manchester and New Mills are financed by Greater Manchester P.T.E. while trains westward from Sheffield are supported nationally.

Passenger improvements on the route this year have seen it become part of a wider scheme linking Humberside with Doncaster, Sheffield and Manchester and it is intended at the earliest opportunity to uplift these services into the locomotive-hauled category similar to those on the Diggle route.

A proposal to withdraw local passenger trains through the Hope Valley was faced with severe opposition in 1966 when the Minister of Transport declined permission, on grounds of hardship.

Hope Valley also carries large tonnages for the giant cement works at Hope. Cancellation of freight contracts and loss of revenue would amount to £2.5 million. The cement business is long-term and there would be strong opposition to it going by road through the beautiful Peak National Park. Almost all the traffic is carried in privately-owned wagons and has to work to tight schedules because of customer demand for maximum use of wagons.

As a commercial undertaking we could not throw away all this important revenue by attempting to sever the Hope Valley route.

DO NOTHING?

Would it, then, be easier, more sensible, more long-sighted, for British Rail to do nothing at all, to go on forcing its freight business to bear the heavy costs of over-capacity.

The answer can only be "No". It is not British Rail's intention to close the whole of the Woodhead route, merely to rationalise by withdrawing freight services from the central part of it which is proving to be a crippling financial burden. Redundant materials, alone, would bring in £2.26 million. This would more than pay for improvements on the other routes to enable the traffic currently using Woodhead to be moved even more efficiently. These costs are assessed at £1.08 million. The net result would be a "once-only" benefit of £1.18 million.

The diversion of freight services would also enable the sale for scrap of 45 thirty-year-old electric locomotives. £350,000 could also be saved by not replacing two life-expired specialist maintenance trains.

Long-term savings would include a reduction in annual costs assessed at £1.633 million.

The re-diagramming of diesel locomotives would enable 10 from the existing fleet to handle all the diverted freight. Train and crew working would be enhanced, and, with shorter journey times, there would be more economic use of the fleet of merry-go-round wagons. An annual electricity bill exceeding £500,000 would be cancelled out.

To do nothing at all - to retain the central part of the route - would, in maintenance costs, involve British Rail in spending £14.4 million over the next 10 years. And the existing locomotive fleet would have to be refurbished within a few years.

From a passenger business viewpoint, there is no justification for passenger trains over the central part of the route, and no requirement for re-electrification as part of the strategic electrified network. There is, indeed, a much stronger case for electrification of the Diggle route as the strategic link for both passenger and freight traffic.

SOME PARTS RETAINED

Some parts of the Woodhead route will be retained. There is every indication that Greater Manchester P.T.E. will continue to support the electrified suburban train services into Manchester from Hadfield and Glossop.

Although the Penistone-Sheffield section of the line does not receive support - on the grounds of lack of public need - it is understood that South Yorkshire County Council is seriously considering support for a Sheffield to Penistone service via Barnsley, with a new bus/rail inter-change at Barnsley and the possibility of a new rail halt at Silkstone.

With the Leeds-Huddersfield-Penistone service already receiving backing from West Yorkshire P.T.E. this completes financial support for the whole route Leeds-Huddersfield-Penistone-Barnsley-Sheffield. This enables the present unsupported Sheffield-Penistone service to be withdrawn and the five miles between Penistone and Deepcar to be closed. The remainder of the route between Deepcar and Sheffield Nunnery Junction would remain as a single line to serve the Stocksbridge Steelworks near Deepcar.

The line between West Silkstone Junction and Penistone would be retained. The sections to be closed are: the 7½ miles between Wombwell and West Silkstone Junctions; the 15¾ miles from Penistone to Hadfield, including Woodhead Tunnel; and the 2½ miles between Godley Junction and Apethorne Junction. The line between Hadfield, Glossop and Manchester would remain and control of power supplies would be transferred from Penistone to Crewe. The exchange sidings at Rotherwood, Wath and Wombwell would close. All materials from the closed route would be recovered. Serviceable equipment would be used elsewhere and the rest sold as scrap.

Apart from a passing loop at Edale on the Hope Valley line to handle extra trains - at an estimated cost of £123,000 - and an expenditure of about £600,000 on the Diggle route, no additional track or signalling cost is necessary to cater for trains diverted from Woodhead. This has been provided for in the financial assessment.

THE EFFECT ON STAFF

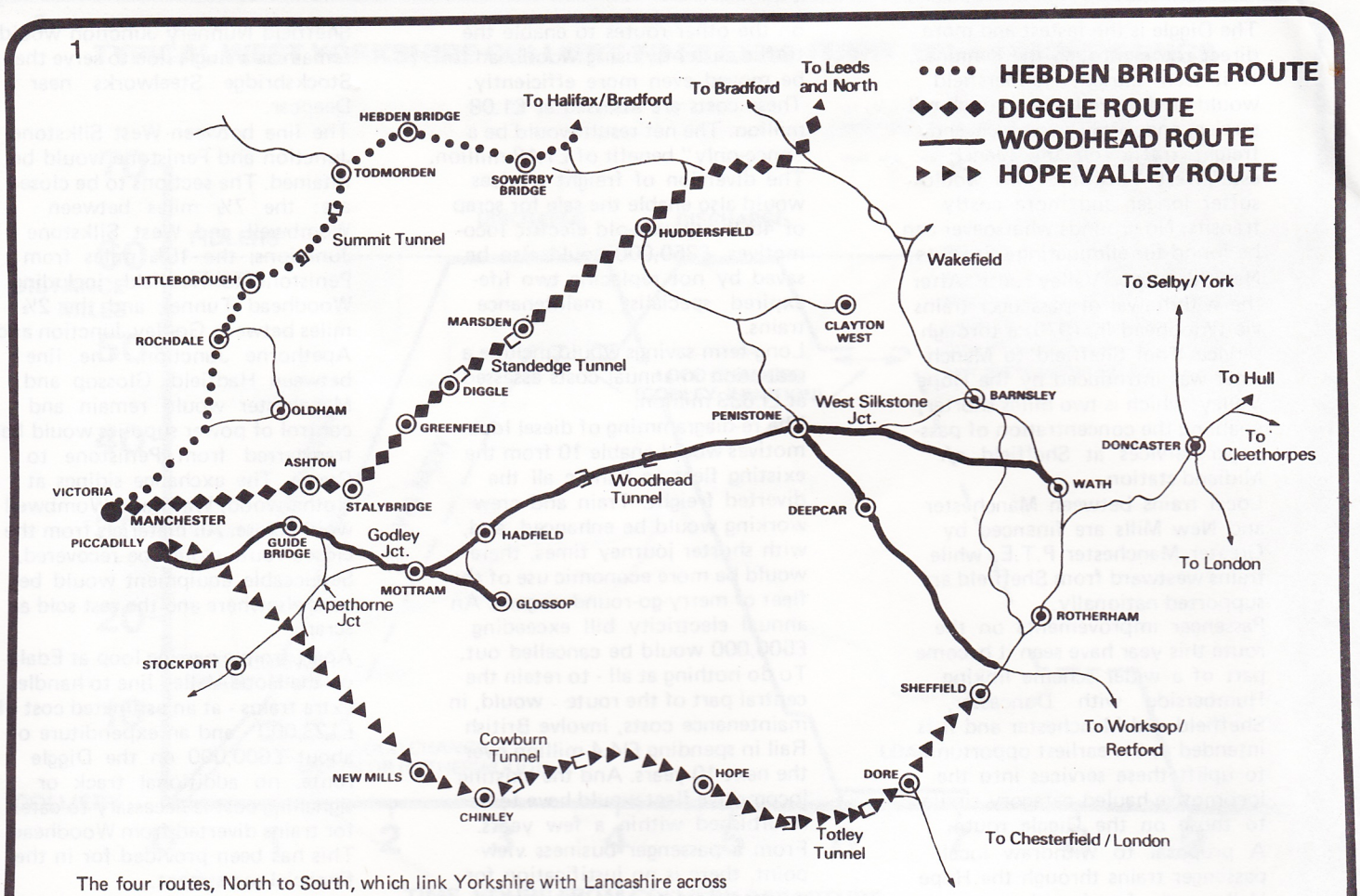
And what about the staff? Closure of the central section of the Woodhead route would reduce the number of established posts by 261 but as many of these are unfilled, the actual number of staff involved would be 184.

Of these, 49 who are employed in signalling and civil engineering maintenance work would be offered alternative work in other mobile maintenance gangs. Virtually all the remainder would be offered alternative posts.

THE CHOICE

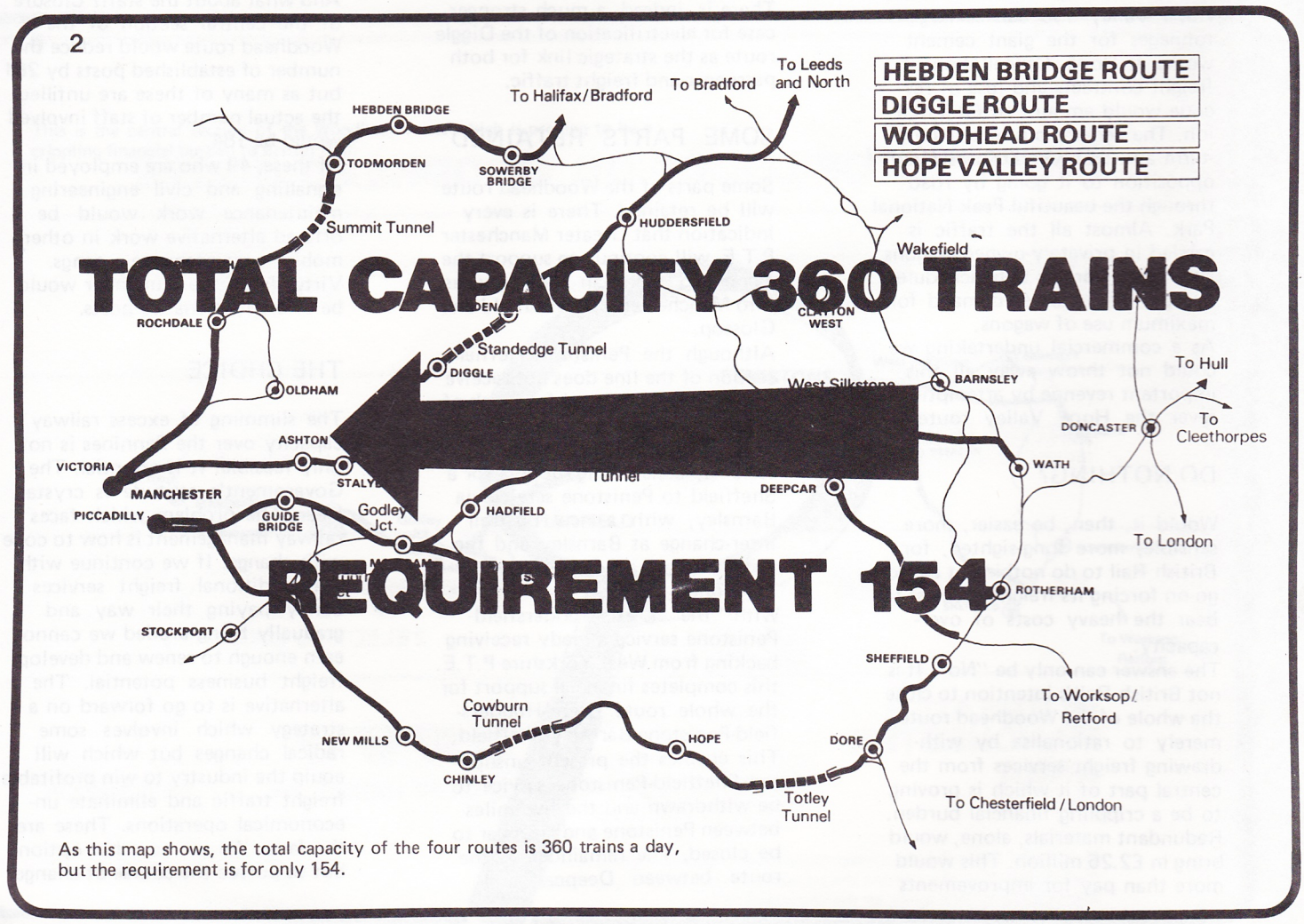
The slimming of excess railway capacity over the Pennines is not only feasible. It is essential. The Government's attitude is crystal clear. The problem which faces railway management is how to cope with change. If we continue with our traditional freight services barely paying their way and gradually being eroded we cannot earn enough to renew and develop freight business potential. The alternative is to go forward on a strategy which involves some radical changes but which will equip the industry to win profitable freight traffic and eliminate uneconomical operations. These are the facts. We see no other option but to pursue the course of change.

1



The four routes, North to South, which link Yorkshire with Lancashire across the Pennine chain.

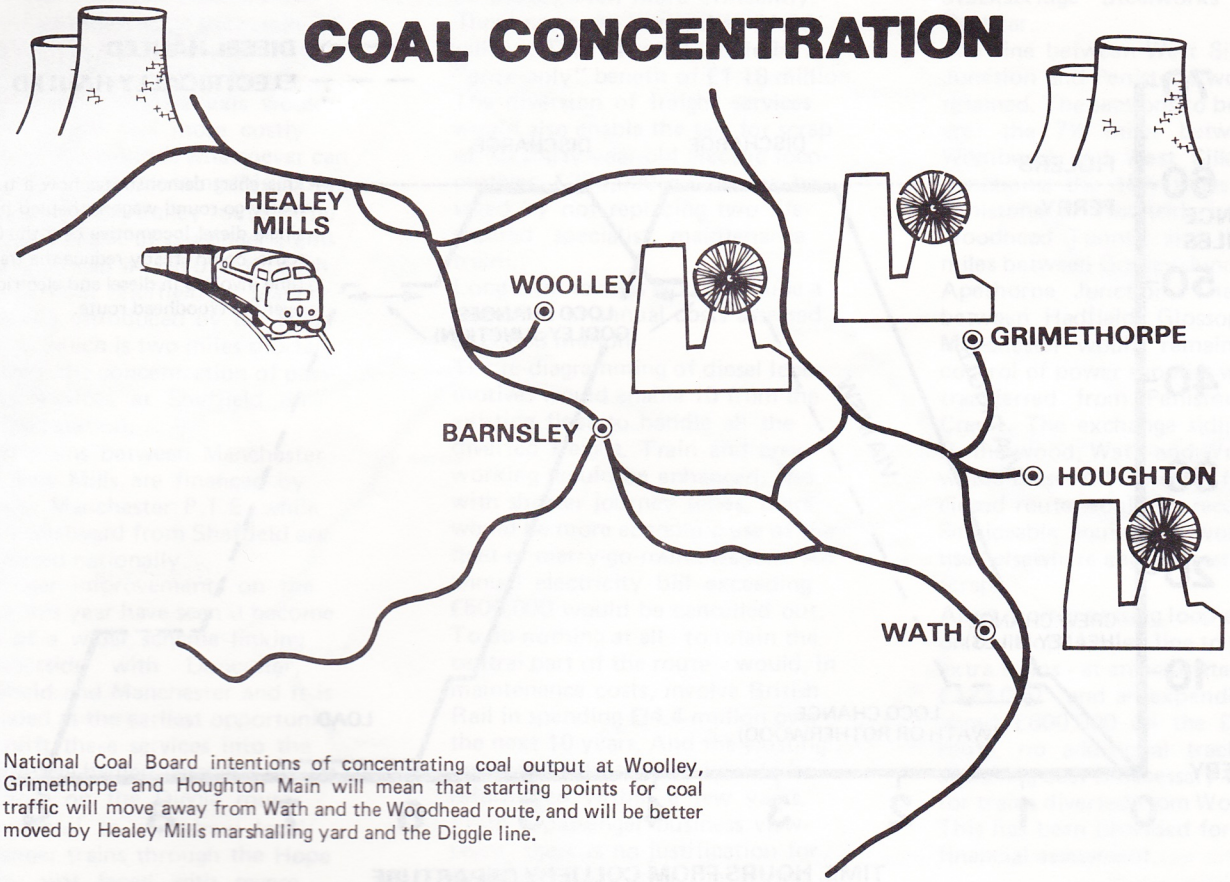
2



As this map shows, the total capacity of the four routes is 360 trains a day, but the requirement is for only 154.

3

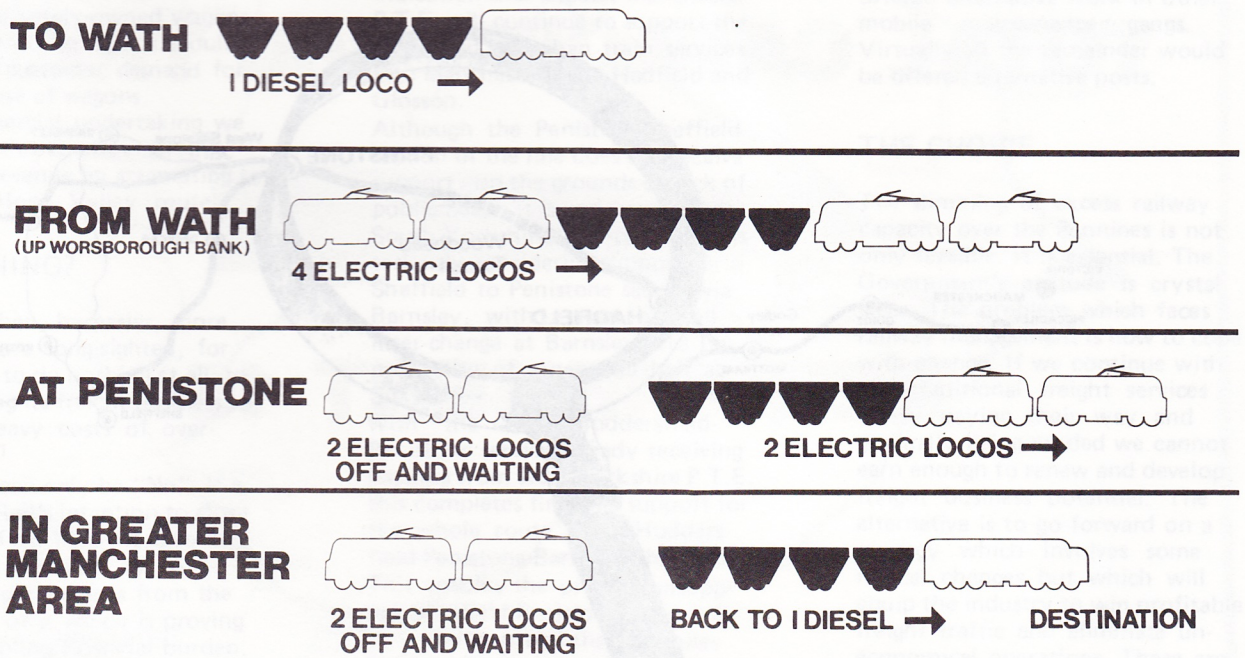
COAL CONCENTRATION



National Coal Board intentions of concentrating coal output at Woolley, Grimethorpe and Houghton Main will mean that starting points for coal traffic will move away from Wath and the Woodhead route, and will be better moved by Healey Mills marshalling yard and the Diggle line.

4

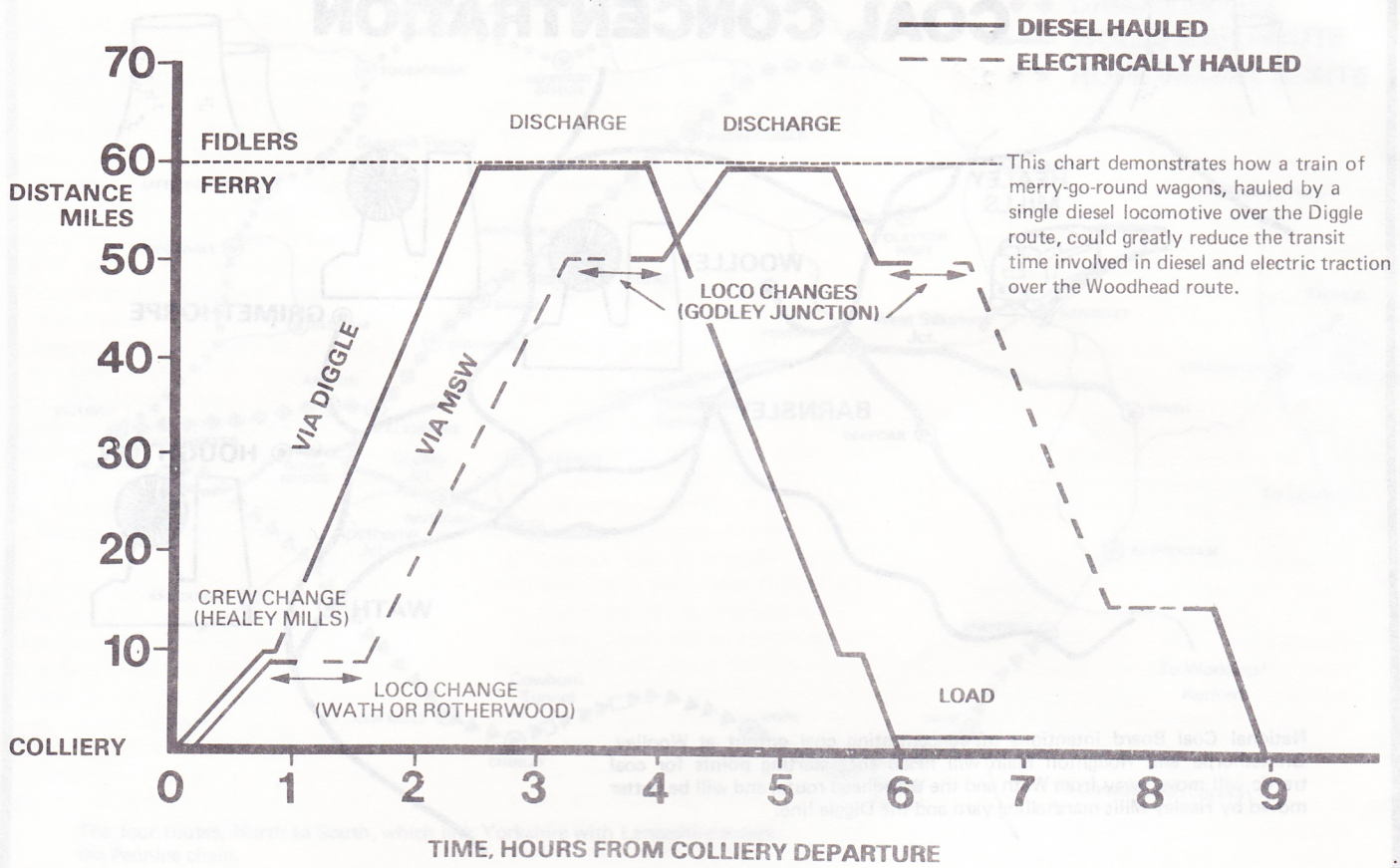
CHANGES OF LOCOS ON WOODHEAD ROUTE



Most trains using the Woodhead route have to change locomotives, many of them twice. This chart shows the sequence of traction changes, from diesel to electricity, and back again, on the Woodhead route.

5

TYPICAL WEST YORKSHIRE COLLIERY TO FIDLERS FERRY MGR TRAIN TIMINGS

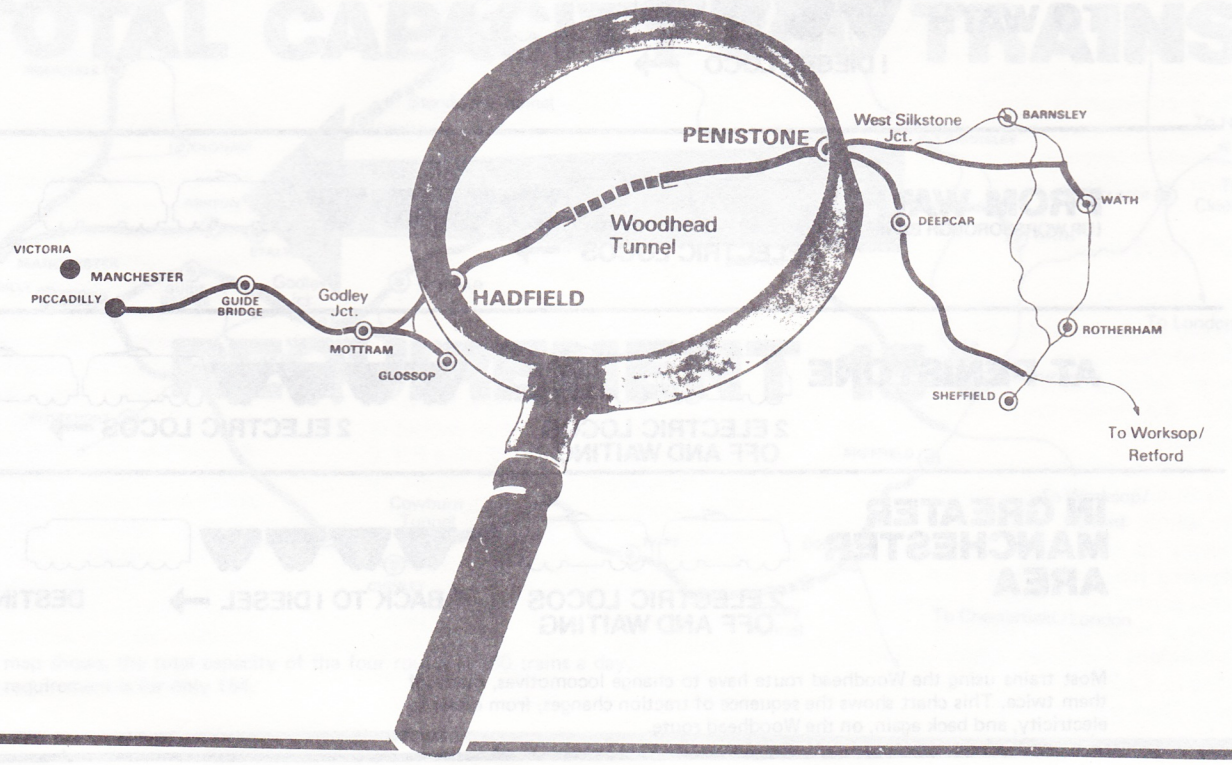


This chart demonstrates how a train of merry-go-round wagons, hauled by a single diesel locomotive over the Diggle route, could greatly reduce the transit time involved in diesel and electric traction over the Woodhead route.

6

This is the central section of the Woodhead route which is proving to be a crippling financial burden to British Rail.

WOODHEAD ROUTE



Financial Effect of Woodhead Closure

Net Once-only Savings: —

NEW WORKS	£1.08m
REDUNDANT MATERIALS	£2.26m

Net Once-only Savings = £1.18 million

These are the net "once only" savings which would be effected by closure of the central section of the Woodhead route.

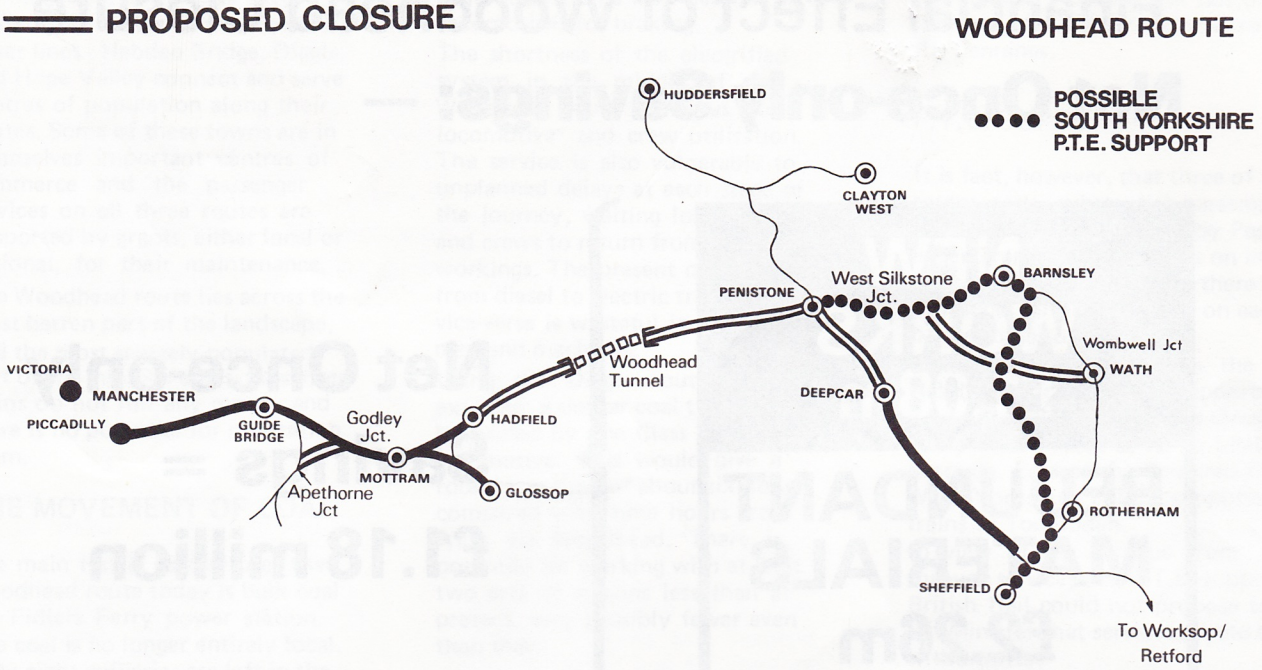
Financial Effect of Woodhead Closure.

Annual Savings

	£m
ADDITIONAL LOCO CHARGE	0.300
ADDITIONAL LOCO. MAINTENANCE	0.160
	0.460
RENEWALS	0.750
MAINTENANCE (FIXED ASSETS)	0.710
TRACTION AND POWER	0.186
OPERATING STAFF	0.447
	2.093

Net Annual Benefit = £1.633 million

This chart illustrates the annual savings which would accrue from closure of the central section of the Woodhead route.



Shown on this map are the four sections of line which should be withdrawn on the Woodhead route and the new Sheffield/Barnsley/Penistone service being investigated by South Yorkshire P.T.E.

Closure of Woodhead Route

Staff Effects

Established posts	—	**261**
Actual Staff	—	**184**
CCE & CS & TE Staff for other mobile gangs	—	**49**

As the diagram shows, the jobs of 184 railway staff would be affected by closure of the central section of the Woodhead route. However, 49 would be offered alternative work in mobile maintenance gangs and virtually all of the remainder would be offered alternative posts.