



Audio transcript

The Rail and Road Pod

Series 2 - Episode 6: Inside Rail Live

In this episode, the Rail and Road Pod visits the Rail Live exhibition at the Quinton Rail Technology Centre in Warwickshire.

The event, over two days, brings the entire rail industry together in a real railway environment.

Over the two days, we spoke to Rail Live's Managing Editor, Nigel Harris, who discussed planning for the 2021 event and also with a number of rail industry professionals on topics such as electrification, track worker safety and the role of the rail regulator in a reformed railway.

There's also the unveiling of the GB RailFreight locomotive named Major John Poyntz, who was the final Royal Engineer to be an HM Inspecting Officer of Railways. We spoke to those who shared memories of Major John Poyntz.

Host: Kenny Walker

Welcome to the Rail and Road podcast, I'm your host, Kenny Walker. And for this episode, we brought the Pod to the Rail Live event at the Quinton Rail Technology Centre in Warwickshire. There are over 170 exhibitors and live demonstrations across two days covering every element of the railway, from rolling stock to plant and signalling equipment, freight to technical displays by British Transport Police. We've spoken to a number of rail industry professionals across the two days. And first up is the Managing Editor of Rail Magazine and Event Director, Nigel Harris, who told us a little bit more about the event.

Nigel Harris, Managing Editor of Rail Magazine

Well, the biggest challenge this year was the will we, won't we be able to run it, which only really resolved itself about three months ago. And that had to be our call and our risk according to what procedures were in place to manage events of this kind. And so we worked very closely with the relevant government departments on what we could and couldn't do in terms of restrictions and with the local authorities who manage the events at ground level on what you actually do.

And there were endless meetings with them about this, you know, hand sanitiser how the stands will be set up, because it's such a big site that was very much in our favour. But it still wasn't easy. But we managed to find our way through it and decided that we were going to go ahead. And we had a slightly nervous moment yesterday when we got a message here that there was a visitor to see Chris Lester, the event director, the environmental officer for the local authority, environmental health.

And he saw Chris and said, look, I've been here for a couple of hours pottering about, looking at all the issues, he said. And I just have to say I'm very impressed. He said it's not easy to keep those sort of procedures in place. He said, and you've done really well. He said, I've got a couple of points. I can offer a bit of advice on fine tuning, but obviously we were sticking with the first bit of that statement and all mopped our brows in.

Host Kenny Walker

Huge relief?

Nigel Harris, Managing Editor of Rail Magazine

A huge relief, which is a real tribute to the people you can hear in the background who are on our team, who organised the event that absolutely played a blinder, because it's always difficult to organise this event.

But this year, at hyperspeed in three months, it's been extremely difficult.

Host Kenny Walker

Speaking of speed, Nigel, the transport to the event itself, that was brought about very quickly, wasn't it?

Nigel Harris, Managing Editor of Rail Magazine

Well, we were not happy with the idea of bringing people to a rail event by coach by bus. Great Western a few months ago, Mark Hopwood, suggested that it was his idea because we'd run a special train from Paddington previous years a couple of times a day. And he said, look, why don't I run four shuttles in a day from Worcester. And if you imagine, Worcester is at the centre of literally a big capital X connecting all four corners of the country.

So, for example, you could have got on a train early in the morning in Newcastle or York, change once at Worcester and come straight into the show. And that applied from London, from the south west and from the north west. So absolutely we will do that. We had it all set up and then we had the Hitachi fleet cracks issues which just torpedoed their plans and put that fleet under such pressure that they couldn't do that.

So we looked at using the Stadler Metro Electric Liverpool Tram to do that and that was very ambitious because it needed charging and it's not yet approved for full passenger use. So we talked to HMRI and everybody else, and that foundered because the unions had a concern about it wasn't fully approved in carrying passengers, all understandable stuff. And every now and then you come across a project where you suddenly realise it's not meant to be.

So we actually stood it down and we said we're going to have to go with the buses. And then a week ago last Saturday, so less than a fortnight ago, in other words, Adrian Shooter rang me at home on Saturday night and said, look, I've just become aware of your predicament. He said, I'm one train left on site which we're due to deliver to Transport for Wales fairly soon. If Network Rail would play ball and could get a little temporary platform done as they've once done before at Honeybourne we could use that, I think Transport for Wales will give their permission. Now, that could take months in a previous railway life. So there's Vivarail, there's QRTC here. There was Network Rail, there's ROG, there's SLC - all these different things. We had it sorted in 72 hours. Everybody agreed to it. Transport for Wales saw the benefits of their train coming to the rescue at the last minute and they've done very well out the PR. So well done them.

Host Kenny Walker

A great example of partnership working?

Nigel Harris, Managing Editor of Rail Magazine

Well, it was collaborative and partnership working and it was people looking at it and saying not why, but why not, we can and do it. People were being any number of cliches: half full and not half empty. And that train ran every half hour back and forth yesterday. It's doing the same today. The first train yesterday morning, I think 8.20am from Honeybourne brought 30 people and it's been carrying people. Interestingly people at the show are also seizing the opportunity to have a trip out and back to Honeybourne just to sample the train. So it has become a feature in its own right, so everybody benefits and we found that spirit everywhere, nobody's breaking the rules, but people are going out the way to find a way to do stuff, rather not do stuff. And we've all seen far too much of that over the last 10 or 15 years.

Host Kenny Walker

A great attitude to take. And if I was to ask you for one particular highlight from the event over the two days?

Nigel Harris, Managing Editor of Rail Magazine

That we got the event to open yesterday morning on time and we had the biggest crowd ever yesterday, I mean, there's so many others, the you know, the Stadler train, there's a shuttle. It took us three years to get Network Rail's and NMT (New Measurement Train) in because that runs on the network in its entirety every fortnight. And so it's a busy train. And so it took sort of three years to plan its schedule so that it could, if you like, nip in here for a couple of days without disrupting that schedule. And of course, people in the industry who are the contractors and the heart of this show will always be the yellow equipment, the big plant. That's how this show started to be able to take a look inside that because it runs at night. Nobody sees it and we don't know what's inside. So the opportunity to see that high tech equipment, which is amazing, there's some world world-beating equipment on that train and nobody knows about it. And given the railway gets far too much of a kicking in the media from a media and a public, which tends to think it still picks and shovels and it isn't, you know, if you go and look at that, the Network Rail helicopters, there's the first application in this country of the military-grade cameras on the Apache helicopters.

And so the definition with which the Network Rail Air Ops people can investigate a fault on the railway, which means they can do it quicker, cheaper and safely. They're not putting men out on the railway.

Host Kenny Walker

Reduce that risk then?

Nigel Harris, Managing Editor of Rail Magazine

Yeah, I mean, there's equipment on the trains that if you were to put a crisp bag and secure it to a sleeper, the train can pass over 100 miles an hour. It could take a picture. You could read the ingredients on the back.

There's some well beating stuff going on. And we ought to be prouder of it than we are. And we ought to tell more people about it than we do. And that's one of the reasons we do this show.

Host Kenny Walker

Hopefully that message is getting across Nigel there's definitely been a really good buzz about the place.

Nigel Harris, Managing Editor of Rail Magazine

There has. And that buzz is crucial because what everybody understands is what we're trying to create here is a rail industry equivalent to the Farnborough Air Show, where there's real business done very, you know, and the strategic political stuff. You know, we've got Ian Prosser, we've got John Larkinson from ORR in the conference this afternoon. Yesterday, we had Andrew Haines and Peter Hendy from Network Rail in there, in a socially distanced [manner], full hall [with people] all sides of the tent. Often people stood around as well. But you can then go and look at that helicopter. You can look in the NMT. It is. Buzz is the right word. And we intend to keep building that. And we're very grateful for all the people, including ORR, who commit to coming here because we need all the key industry players to be pleased and proud to come in and sort of show the world what they do.

Host Kenny Walker

Thanks very much Nigel, it has been great to be part of this. Appreciate your time.

Nigel Harris, Managing Editor of Rail Magazine

Not at all. It's a pleasure to fly the flag. It's a great privilege working in and alongside, you know, what's probably the finest industry in the world. We invented trains and railways and we ought to be prouder of them than we are. And this is our way of doing our bit.

Host Kenny Walker

So we heard earlier from Nigel Harris, Managing Editor of Rail Magazine, about the Network Real New Measurement Train and how it's taken three years for it to get onto site at the Rail Live event. So we've got Mike Black here from Network Rail to tell us a little bit more.

Mike Black, Network Rail

It's got a number of things it does. It essentially takes track workers away from having to do inspections manually and on the track and takes video footage and takes a number of measurements to determine the status of the track. So it's got things like plain line pattern recognition, which recognises whether there are rail clips missing. It measures the overhead lines for where. And it also measures things like the sort of alignment of the track as well.

Host Kenny Walker

How long has it been in operation for?

Mike Black, Network Rail

Since 2003, it was introduced after a number of rail accidents and was designed to make sure that we're doing regular and detailed checks of the track.

Host Kenny Walker

OK, so we're here at the site where GB Railfreight (GBRF) and ORR have honoured the last Royal Engineer officer to be appointed Her Majesty's Railway Inspector, Major John Poyntz by naming a freight locomotive after him.

Stephen Davies MBE, speaking at the unveiling

I'm delighted for the support from GBRF and indeed from the ORR. Now, what is key about John was that, of course, he was the last Royal Engineer member of Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate, a tradition going back to 1840, and of course, by the time he finished in 1989 in the Army and then went into the Inspectorate, he then effectively became the last of a long and inspirational line of Sappers.

Host Kenny Walker

GB Railfreight's Class 66764 will now take the name of the former inspector who died in November 2020, aged 82.

Unveiling of Major John Poyntz

We're now going to move on to the unveiling itself. [background noise, sounds of cameras taking photographs and applause].

Host Kenny Walker

We managed to speak to John Smith, Managing Director of GB Railfreight to tell us a little bit more about it.

John Smith, Managing Director, GB Railfreight

It's brilliant. You'll see together behind me, we've gone another locomotive named Chinook as well. So we've got a long relationship with the Armed Forces. We had great fun when we did the naming with Chinook, because we took the loco in on a low loader to Odium where they're based out of. So it was really it was Nigel Harris of Rail Magazine asked me if if we'd set this thing up and we were only too pleased to do so. And it kind of links in. There is a commercial side to it as well, because we haul the MoD traffic around the UK and we're very keen to grow that get it off the road to get it onto rail.

Host Kenny Walker

We also spoke to Steve Davies and Ian Prosser, who shared some of their memories and thoughts on Major John Poyntz.

Stephen Davies MBE

Well, I knew John well from Army days, and in particular, we would get together and talk railways. In fact, we sought each other out and bumped into each other in Berlin on one occasion, which is when we realised who each other was. It was straight to the local bar and it was great fun. But he was I don't I don't use the word flippantly, but he was a legend in railway terms, not least because of the symbolism of him being the final Sapper engineer or engineer within HMRI. But he was a great guy and I thought Ian's words were really crucial. He was an encyclopaedia of railways and it was just extraordinary. And. All right, you know, we've we've got some fantastic people working in the railway industry. But I think it was right that John's been singled out for this honour. And for me, that's why when I was asked to pull together a military component for this I didn't need asking twice.

Ian Prosser, Chief Inspector of Railways at ORR

Absolutely. Having met John a few times and sat down with him, as I mentioned in my talk, about going through our page by page the book we produced for across the history of the HMRI, which is over 180 years now. He knew a great deal and was able to correct even people like Nigel Harris and David Keay, who got a lot of knowledge as well. And of course, my part of that was the modern piece of the book. So he's charm and wit was something that you rarely find and how he could sort of tell you off in a very nice and polite way.

Host Kenny Walker

At the show, a number of people heard from Nick Millington, Network Rail's Director of Workforce Safety Task Force, which has been formed to target track worker safety. Back in 2019, the Office of Rail and Road issued Network Rail with two improvement notices in this area. Improving track worker safety and removing unassisted look at warning is a key priority for the regulator. We caught up with Nick and here's what he had to say on the taskforce.

Nick Millington, Network Rail

The Safety Task Force Programme has over 200 people employed on it, but indirectly, everyone in Network Rail is employed on it. We are systematically removing risk and we will see the end of lookout working because that is the highest risk. We will see the end of LOWS (lookout operated warning systems) working because that is also very high risk along with lookouts. We are protecting line blockages. We are getting sufficient T3 repossessions, and we are restructuring our

maintenance plan so it's more, effective and aligned with safer access. We can do this, there are lots of fear narratives against what we're doing and with the benefit of data, support and not backing off a problem, we can support teams through this change.

And that's what we've done so far. So lookout working is now 90 per cent damn, near misses are 60 per cent down. And we've got a line of sight to finish the job. It's going to take us about another 18 months. I've got a healthy relationship with the ORR. You know, I understand the role that you undertake. I respect the role as well. And also I understand how complicated it is to maintain and operate a railway safely.

We all know what we want to do, and you could let the legal side of things get in the way if you choose to, but I've chosen not to. And it's important that we all understand where the risk is and we all understand about risk transfer and we walk together to a much safer place. And I think, you know, certainly in a dialogue that I've had with the regional inspectors and the national inspectors and also Ian, you know, I couldn't ask for any more help, really.

There's some natural scepticism because this has been tried before and it didn't work. I'm trying to ensure that I'm taking those reservations seriously, providing tangible evidence, as we get through the plan that we are doing this properly, I'm personally committed to it. I think people can who've heard me on the stage the passion I've got on it. I know that Tyler. I know that Gareth and Spike and John Wright and I can give other names. Those deaths were unnecessary and I'm personally committed to ending open line working in that fashion. And I understand where the regulator's mind is in terms of the hierarchy of risk controls. I align with them and we've got to do it. If you had told me two years ago that I would be patrolling with a drone, I wouldn't have believed it. But we are now. If you had told me that I was trying geofencing kit to to offset the 20 percent of the fatalities, I possibly wouldn't have believed it. I wouldn't have believed it was as accurate as it is. But there are many other things that are out there in terms of innovation that can reduce the time that we expose people to risk or indeed eliminate it. This Rail Live here today is a fantastic example of where that innovation and entrepreneurship exist.

Host Kenny Walker

Electrification is a hot topic on the railways, and we're joined here at the ORR our exhibiter tent by Gary Keenor, Group Engineer at Atkins. Atkins was one of a number of companies, which worked in partnership with Network Rail and ORR on

the recent electrification project on the Midland Mainline. The project, which was authorised by the regulator with no conditions attached, was delivered on time and on budget. Garry, could you tell us a little bit more about your involvement?

Garry Keenor, Atkins

So up until quite recently, the Midland Mainline was electrified as far as Bedford that was done in the early 1980s, but there's not been, and the Midland Mainline is the last trunk route in the UK that's not fully electrified. And so what we would call Key 8.1 of Midland Mainline electrification is Bedford to Kettering and onto Corby. So we, Atkins, were the designer for that. We were working with Scottish Power Lines (SPL) who are here on site to design the Skinner site. So they were doing the construction and we did the design. So we were working for them as part of a design and build consortium that worked really well actually, because electrifying a live railway is really hard. It is a hard thing to do because you have to do it without disrupting the existing train service and you have to work within those small access periods that you get. So as designers, we can't just design it in isolation. We have to talk to the stores and find out how they want to build it. And our design will be heavily influenced by how they are actually going to go about construction.

So we did the we did a full detailed design all the way to what we call approved for construction drawings, which is the drawings that go out to site and get built. But that wasn't the end of our role. We also got involved in the entry into service phase. Once you finished construction, there's then a, it's not a question of finished building it now lets start running electric trains there is as a whole, series of tests, measurements and safety justifications have to be put together to demonstrate to the ORR as it happens that this railway is now safe, first of all safe to energise and then safe to run electric trains in service. We saw some of the emails at the time. And, you know, just the whole team's really, really proud from Network Rail, SPL, Atkins and everyone else that's been involved. It's not a, you know, you know, one company delivers that it is a joint effort. And no, it was really good to see the first electric trains run on May 16 on time, on budget, electrification. It's nice to be able to say that. Obviously a lot of things went wrong on earlier electrification schemes, but we took a lot of the learnings in that and piled it into Key 8.1 and it's really paid off i think.

Host Kenny Walker

Straight from the stage at Rial Live I've got ORR's Chief Executive John Larkinson to give us a final word for today's podcast. John, we've just heard you discuss the future of rail regulation. Can you tell our listeners a little bit more?

John Larkinson, ORR CEO

So one of the key things I've been talking about is the setting up of this new body, Great British Railways, which can integrate most of the track and train in Britain. And from that, I was asking the question, what was the role of ORR in the future when this new GBR is in place? And what's going to happen is that our role is going to widen. So we will have oversight of the whole of GBR's work, whether that's infrastructure, whether it's operations. So we need to prepare for that world, when our role is going to change our roles, going to broaden over time.

Host Kenny Walker

Thanks, John. And that brings us to a close from Rail Live. We hope you've enjoyed this episode. Thanks for listening. Until next time. Goodbye.



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