

## Railways suffering from years of underinvestment

Sir — Chris Gray is old enough to know better than to try and make political capital out of the state of the railways (*Gray Matter*, July 4).

The fact that the railway infrastructure is in very poor condition is the result, as he is well aware, of nearly 50 years of chronic underinvestment by both Labour and Conservative governments since the railways were nationalised in 1948. Had that underinvestment continued, the system would be in a good deal worse state than it is now. We would not have seen the significant

investment in rolling stock by most franchisees, not least Thames Trains and Virgin, who are the major users of the lines through Oxford.

And the system would not have been able to absorb a 25 per cent plus increase in passengers since privatisation. Those, like Chris, who don't (or won't) remember the dire state of British Rail prior to 1996 and privatisation have short memories.

Peter Newell  
Oxford

## Serious and concerted effort needed to get people back on their bicycles

Sir — Congratulations on Andrew Ffrench's article and your editorial (July 18), which drew much-needed attention to the fact that the level of cycling has been declining in Oxford.

It is a disgrace that in a city like Oxford that so many potential cyclists are put off cycling because inadequate routes make cyclists feel unsafe.

The county council has set itself the target of 20 per cent of journeys in the county being made by bicycle by 2011. However, the latest 2001 Census figures show that cycling has declined to under eight per cent of journeys made. To meet its own targets the county council needs to increase cycling nearly threefold in eight years!

We know that this is achievable — as recently as 1986, there were 26,000 cycle journeys daily into central Oxford; today there are around 10,000. The OTS has improved the lot of buses as well as reducing car journeys in the city by 20 per cent, but it has not done much for cycling. It is now time for the county council to make a serious and concerted effort to get its constituents back on their bikes.

Bicycles are three times as quick as cars on commuter routes such as Botley Road; they are also clean, convenient and keep their users fit. Cycling is still a relatively safe way to travel although it may not always feel that way; and it would be even safer if the roads were designed with cycles given the priority they deserve.

Let's see the county council put its money where its mouth is: let's see a proper cycle network installed across Oxford, with current blackspots (the Plain; High Street; Cowley Road, etc) made safe for cyclists. This is not a remotely tall order — we simply need the county council to have the political will to effect the changes that are needed.

Readers who would like to find out more about Cyclox, the cycling campaign for Oxford, should go to [www.oxfoe.co.uk/cyclox/](http://www.oxfoe.co.uk/cyclox/)

James Styring  
Cyclox  
Oxford

## No surprise

Sir — Anyone who is surprised at the failing popularity of cycling in Oxford presumably does not cycle. The fact is cycling is unsafe,

uncomfortable in bad weather and physically demanding. Compare to a cyclist the protection given to a vehicle driver, including seat belts, air bags, four wheels, suspension and a surrounding shell. The OTS has given top-predator role to the bus, the main enemy of the cyclist due to its size, frequent stopping in the normal cycle lane and its unrestrained speed. It has also created many largely vehicle-free streets on which pedestrians walk without heed.

Add in drivers who pull into the kerb while waiting at traffic lights and the potholed surfaces, then replace your headline to read 'Great news, some people still cycle in post-OTS Oxford'.

W.K. Leonard  
Oxford

## Nothing changes

Sir — It was no surprise to read the front page (July 18) about the decline in cyclists in the city centre. I wrote you a letter some two years ago which you kindly published about this very problem. Nothing has changed. It's still the "empty buses"! Like many others I have been knocked off my bike and have to walk from North Oxford, which is quite a strain for an old codger of 75. On an average day when I reach George Street, Bonn Square, Carfax or High Street, I will have to stand on the pavement and wait for six empty buses to pass before I can even cross the street.

When you consider the debacle of Cornmarket it is hardly surprising. Where are the people responsible for this? If it happened in Soviet Eastern Europe they would be locked away or probably worse.

Peter Masterson  
Oxford

## Hybrid future

Sir — Contrary to John Power's claims (*Report*, July 11), city centre air pollution is in general better now than it was before the OTS. This is only to be expected, as there are now 20 per cent fewer vehicles entering the city centre every day than there were pre-OTS. However, there are a number of locations where the OTS has made air pollution worse.

This was predicted at the time and was one of the reasons why the Green Party argued at the OTS public inquiry that the changes did not do enough to reduce traffic, rather than displace it into the areas immediately joining the city centre, like the Station Junction.

Another factor is that air quality standards are being improved. New air pollution limits come into force in 2005 and Oxford will fail to meet them unless swift and radical action is taken.

The city council has declared a local air quality management zone, and this gives it significant new powers to protect air quality, including banning non-low emission vehicles from the zone or closing roads if necessary.

The bus companies should plan ahead now and make sure all their new buses are dual powered or hybrid vehicles that would reduce pollution in the city centre by relying on electric motors or fly-wheels for some of their power, alongside smaller diesel engines.

Councillor Mike Woodin  
Green Party  
Oxford City Council

## Criminal damage

Sir — Last week, for the seventh time in the last two years, there was a major traffic accident on Sandford Road involving the so-called "traffic calming" islands which have been built into the road either side of a hump-backed bridge.

Each time a car crashes into one of these islands (there are four of them) any damage is quickly repaired and the "council" has even strengthened the structures so that they are more likely to inflict greater damage to any car (and its passengers) that may run into them.

This latter action of the "council" is in my opinion criminal. Anyone who knowingly increases the likelihood of inflicting greater damage to the vehicle and thus recklessly endangers the lives of the occupants of the vehicle is surely acting in a way which should attract the attention of the Thames Valley Police? I am, therefore, left wondering why the police have not started criminal proceedings against those people responsible for this outrage.

Dr S.R. Turnbull  
Littlemore