

Coastal Fission

Old Sparky, Private Eye

In summer, 2013, government spin doctors said a deal with the French to build two new nuclear power plants in the U.K. was in the bag (Eye 1351). It wasn't. Now the spinners are in action again.

This time they are hinting that during the state visit in October of China's president Xi Jinping, he will commit Chinese money to rescue the endlessly delayed nuclear projects. With his country's dire record on industrial health and safety, Xi should feel at home in the ramshackle edifice that is much of Britain's nuclear infrastructure.

The BBC was last week allowed to "uncover the secret story of Sellafield", with physicist Professor Jim Al-Khalili gushing at his "exclusive and unprecedented access" to the Cumbrian nuclear waste facility, complete with hi-tech robotic storage processes. He faithfully parroted government policy: "Nuclear power, alongside renewable, is crucial for our future energy needs – the cusp of a new nuclear age!"

What the professor didn't see, just two miles up the coast, was the very low-tech 165-year-old single-track Barrow - Carlisle railway that is the industry's Achilles heel. All UK nuclear waste travels along this storm-lashed line in "flask wagon" trains weighing hundreds of tonnes. They run the gauntlet between: four landslips in less than two years (in one, when a train became derailed, another sent to rescue the passengers was itself stranded by a second landslip); a stone-built Victorian railway bridge with gaps in its flood-eroded mortar; a frequently-flooded culvert last repaired in 2009; manually operated level crossing gates; a signal-box usually only manned until 7-30 p.m., although nuclear flask trains sometimes run at midnight.

In May 2010, a torrential rainstorm washed away the embankment to within six feet of the track. Residents called the signaller but a train had already passed him and could not be contacted by radio. The train was only flagged down by locals waving their coats at it. In September 2013, a nuclear flask train was derailed in nearby Barrow-in-Furness; and in January 2014, 70 metres of sea wall was destroyed by a storm, leaving the line suspended in mid-air.

The "new nuclear age" may be ushered in on Chinese money – but what about the Victorian infrastructure?