

## The Destruction of the Railways

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**T**he railways have always been with us. The earliest recorded illustration dates from 1320 and shows a small wooden mine trolley, running in recessed stone guides; it is certain that such systems existed earlier, possibly originating in ancient Greece.

However, it was the great technological explosion brought about by economic liberalism in England and Europe from the 18th century onwards, which caused the development, with such speed and power, of our modern railways. Within decades they had replaced the canals as the backbone of a vigorous industrial transport system.

The early railway entrepreneurs and their gallant companies were a fruit of capitalism; conceived by technology, in freedom, their enterprises nourished further growth in the ability of freedom to produce wealth. The only limitation henceforth would be the boundaries of free, unchained minds, whether of engineers or businessmen. Frequently both. But the dead hand of big government was large, necrotic and mouldering even then. In 1844 Gladstone empowered the state to purchase all subsequently built railways, in a dangerous precedent called the "Cheap Trains Act", called thus because it was dressed up as the first "charter" for third class passengers. The nationalisation provisions were never implemented, but they became components of Labour party policy under which nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange was spearheaded by take-over of fuel, power and transport concerns.

This did not deter willing capitalists, and at the height of its power and prestige under free enterprise, the Railway was within walking distance of most villages in the Kingdom. The tidemark of stations and brave engineering works will testify to those who come after us. Before the days of the motor car, which only few could afford - before the

sixties anyway, there was hardly a citizen, be he ever so poor, who could not reach and afford to travel on the railway. In most areas for three generations all important comings and goings were by train. The price of coal nearly always fell by a third with the opening of the local line, and every new piece of agricultural or industrial machinery came on the freight. Calves, day-old chicks, pigs and other re-enforcements for the local livestock came by passenger train along with the mail, newspapers and soldiers on leave.

The great main lines, among the best laid out and engineered in the world, were the first, inevitable result of capitalism. The thousands of miles of rural branch lines were living proof that everyone benefited from it. Capitalism was showing what would be achieved; lifting itself up by its own bootstraps, it was building the machine with which all the world and its manufactured goods and services would be put quickly in touch with a ready market. With the trains came prompt national newspaper deliveries; mass-produced cheap foodstuffs, fertilisers and building materials, the fast movement of perishables in bulk, standard Greenwich or "Railway" time, and the electric telegraph, at first a facility exclusively provided by the railways.

The railways brought fast, cheap transport to all, even the impossibly remote, and made their customers and shareholders rich in the process. The Great North Road, for example, has been more than a cart track for less than a century. In contrast, there was no station of the London & South Western Railway, not even in deepest Cornwall, that did not advertise through coaches to and from Waterloo every day.

### Government intervention

Industrial history teems with examples of disaster and collapse caused by bureaucrats. The best illustrations are in the U.S.A. where the contrast between the successful Great Northern, which never had one cent of state finance or leverage and yet brought great wealth to its customers and itself, and the thrice-bankrupt Union Pacific which in precisely the opposite case was an

unqualified failure for most of its life, is an excellent object lesson.

In Britain, the few unprofitable Railway Companies had, more often than not, come into being through bureaucratic patronage of some kind, and were usually quietly sold to more vigorous concerns. Thus did the indefatigable Midland Railway, ever run by canny northern accountants, buy the very new, very breathless and very moribund Somerset & Dorset Joint Railway in 1874 even before the first train ran, had this been possible. The Midland lengthened its arms, and many people were spared egg on their faces.

Thus was Britain's rail network built up, under private ownership, to its largely satisfactory state of health, the envy of the modern world, by 1914.

## **War**

It has been said that government is only good at creating two things: war and inflation.

Whether or not this is true, war is an enemy of prosperous free enterprise, and the Railway Companies did not escape their share of sorrows between 1914 and 1918. At an early date their direction "in the national interest" was vested in the "Railway Executive". That they survived coherently after the war, if penurious and worn out, was due to the Executive being composed largely of Railway Officers, not bureaucrats.

As it was, the state, in settlement of its war debt of £145 million, offered £50 million instead and an injunction, effectively, to "Sort it out yourselves".

This caused great difficulties, and was a root cause of the "grouping" of 1923, in which nearly all the Companies lost their identity in return for preserving their private status.

## **The Last Golden Years**

A short Labour Government in the early twenties brought the threat of nationalisation close for the first time, and enterprise was saved by an electoral defeat and by the process of coalition of the Companies.

Although the grouping was a step towards a form of nationalisation, the railways managed to survive in private hands for another 25 years, while preserving in their ranks a stock of engineering excellence. Of the four resulting concerns though, (the Southern, Great Western, London Midland & Scottish and London & North Eastern) only the Great Western was able to carry on much as before, needing only to absorb some minor Companies in Wales.

In spite of their disastrous post-war finances, thanks to being robbed of £90 million by the Government, plus the problems of fusing dozens of fiercely independent concerns, the four new Companies faced the future bravely, and with all the spirit of enterprise of their forebears.

On the Southern, the excellent plan for electrification of all suburban lines was pursued furiously. This company also inherited the LSWR's interest in continuous main line power signalling from very few, large, automated "power boxes", and installed the first automatic four-aspect coloured light signals in the world. Successful aggressive marketing of passenger services more than made up for the low freight tonnages carried, automatic marshalling yards were introduced (very useful for fighting wars as it turned out) and the bold Southampton Docks construction scheme was funded by Southern venture capital. It paid off handsomely. The 30 "Merchant Navy" class locomotives, built before nationalisation, were named for the great shipping lines whose business the Southern brought to Southampton from moribund Liverpool.

The LNER, with Nigel Gresley as chief engineer, produced between 1923 and 1939 arguably the finest steam locomotive fleet in the world, until the arrival of Oliver Bulleid's *Merchant Navies* and *West Countries* on the Southern. Indeed, 4486 "Mallard" still holds the 126 mph world speed record for steam traction. The recent arrival of diesel High Speed Trains on the east coast Main Line has improved only slightly on the 1938 timetables.

Nor were passenger comforts forgotten. Motion pictures and radios, and seam-

stresses for lady passengers were all part of the service.

The LMS, despite the old, deep Euston-St. Pancras rivalries in its midst, produced its share of drive and innovation. It caused the LNER to work very hard in competing for Scottish and northern traffic. The "races to the north" of the 1890's were a reality again. Capitalism proved, yet again, that competition lowered prices and raised standards, and this was not an isolated example.

The Great Western, as ever, maintained its stately, dashing progress into the hearts of its customers, its staff and the nation. The traditions of Brunel, Gooch, and of G.J. Churchward who fathered modern British locomotive development, were improved upon. Several trains boasted 100 mph-plus running over long distances.

### **War again**

War came again, and for the second time in 25 years the Companies found themselves at the behest of government. The needs of war took precedence over replacement, progress and investment, which was actually discouraged. At the end, the state owed the railways a vast war debt; the creditors planned, even before the guns were silenced, to re-equip themselves to cope with the coming peace and prosperity. Such plans included modern high-speed carriages, mostly air-conditioned; new, fast trains to counter the looming spectre of the private car, and fast containerised freight to compete with the increasingly powerful motor lorry. (Containerisation was not, of course a new idea; Brunel's Great Western had used it from the 1840's).

### **Nationalisation**

The state did not pay its debt. Instead, it took the railways into "national ownership" on 1st January 1948, at once ending more than a century of sustained and brilliant engineering progress which had not cost the nation a penny.

Moreover, this act caused, in the end, the drying-up of the supply to other fields of railway-trained craftsmen and technologists.

British firms had built engines for most of the world. Names like the Stevensons, Sharp Stewart, North British, Nielson, Hunslet and Manning-Wardle were known in every continent. Now, British Rail buys diesels from Romania. British contractors laid more metals than the Americans. Now, British Rail is lifting its own.

The greatest tragedy is perhaps the loss of much brilliant engineering technique which characterised the old companies, and the late application of present technology to the railways, which would have come so much sooner under free enterprise. The best example is nationalised traction policy, the fruits of which are only now being harvested.

One example will illustrate this. By 1947 the Southern Railway possessed 140 *Bulleid pacifics*, the most modern, powerful and efficient express steam locomotives ever to run on British metals. So revolutionary were they in many ways, (though not as good as their builder said he could make them) that when one was placed on BR's expensive static test bed at Rugby, it overdrove the instruments, and the operators never succeeded in forcing the boiler to reach its maximum steaming rate, so that this could not be measured.

Of the total of 140 Bulleids, BR "rebuilt" 90 of these to conventional design, at great cost and with some loss of performance. Even then, they were still superb machines. In the furious and ill-considered panic to abolish steam in the sixties, all these bar a preserved few went to the cutting torch, with twenty five years of their lives still to run.

### **The Railways in Decline**

There is no doubt that any railway management team would have faced the problems that BR has found itself with in the years since the war. However, the vital difference between what happened and what might have happened lies in the motivation, drive to succeed and accountability to the market that the private Companies showed throughout their history, and which was largely absent after 1948.

True, there came the lorry, the private car, and latterly the aeroplane. These between

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them combined to reduce the importance of railways as mass transporters, but only because the railways were not, by then, run by men who wanted them to win. The inevitable result was the Beeching cuts of the sixties, and yet more taxpayers' money to be poured into the breach. Competition and capitalism would have won out, where collectivism failed.

Today the rail network in Britain is back down to about its 1870 level. There is not a shire, not a corner of the Islands, which does not contain silent structures, which once echoed to the sound of the railway moving people and industry, and which will endure for centuries as a monument to the spirit of capitalism which built it.

**Free Life**