Railways – History, Memorabilia and Nostalgia

Railway's place in the development of transport

Railways have been part of the transport scene in the UK for two centuries, and indeed their origins go back much further than this to early attempts to improve the efficiency of mining operations with the use of wheeled wagons running over specially prepared grooved plateways.

It took two developments to turn these early efforts into something more like the railway system we recognise today:

1. the recognition of the low rolling resistance of a metal-faced flanged wheel on a raised continuous metal rail, and the ability to produce these iron components economically in sufficient quantities to the required strength and durability
2. the development by Richard Trevithick, an inventor from the Cornish mining tradition, of a steam engine small and efficient enough to be mounted as a source of 'locomotion' on to a vehicle.

It has been well-documented how the conditions for such progress to be achieved existed uniquely in the UK during the period of the 'industrial revolution' and it can be argued that the development of an efficient and effective railway network turned this country into the industrial powerhouse it became during the Victorian era.

The pre-eminent position of railways continued into the 20th century until it was increasingly threatened by the greater flexibility of road transport, both at the personal level and for business purposes. However a 'pendulum swing' is taking us in the 21st century to a view that railways represent a more sustainable solution the UK's transport needs, and investment decisions are correspondingly starting to reflect this view.

Overview historical development

The early driver for railway development may well have been the need to transport raw materials between mines and the industrial customers of their products, but the use of boats around the coast and latterly on canals had demonstrated the economy and flexibility to be gained from 'shipping' bulk quantities over greater distances than were possible across country, by such roads as had existed before. So it was not long before the visionaries foresaw the possibility of a network of railways linking the producers of raw materials with their customers wherever they may be conveniently located, and ultimately with the consumers of the processed goods.

A more dangerous, even subversive, notion which some had was that under the right conditions it would be possible to transport people on this network of rails! It was one thing for railways to change the basis of our industrial capability, but *passenger* transport was a step too far for some, with the potential social consequences of the free movement of people throughout the country. Such opinions informed some of the early decisions on railway construction, but as the momentum and appetite for new schemes built up all but the most determined resistance was swept aside.

As soon as the railway was released from the immediate confines of the mine, quarry or other facility which it served, it became an entity in its own right with the resulting birth of the railway company. Early examples were still locally promoted and based – the Stockton & Darlington and the Liverpool & Manchester (the first passenger carrying railway for public use) being well-known cases. But it was clear that this approach would not provide a truly national network. In the spirit of the age, it was business leaders who banded together to promote 'trunk' schemes e.g. the London & Birmingham Railway, or the Great Western Railway (GWR). Government involvement was limited to oversight by the need for an Act of Parliament to be passed before any railway could be built.

Throughout the Victorian era the railway network grew incrementally as a combined result of local, regional and national initiatives. New railway companies were formed, with many willing investors hoping to find rich dividends, all of this in the highly competitive environment of private enterprise.

The resulting railway network 'grew like topsie', reaching its largest route mileage in the early years of the 20th century.

Small companies serving local communities were generally not commercially viable and tended to be swallowed up by the larger companies they connected with, which themselves had an interest in the traffic and business derived from these smaller concerns. Consolidation within the ranks of these private companies was finally brought to an end by an Act of Parliament of 1921 by which most of the remaining railway companies were formed into four regional groups, which continued to operate as private companies, still able to compete with each other due to overlaps in the by now sprawling railway network.

The 'big four' system of railway companies continued to operate successfully for over 20 years but was finally brought to an end after the railway system itself had been worn out, over-used and under-invested of necessity during the Second World war. Nationalisation by the Labour government in 1948 heralded the retrenchment of British Railways (BR) into a business which reflected the realities of a world which was very different from the one in which the railway system was built up and flourished.

In particular, two aspects of the business were subject to close scrutiny and rationalisation:

1. the route network itself which was evaluated by accounting methods to determine which lines no longer were economically viable to operate. The Beeching report consigned many routes and services to railway history, resulting in many closures which in the light of later developments have been much regretted, and in notable cases have been reversed, either in the public interest or as a result of railway enthusiast action.
2. the decision to look for alternative sources of motive power and to discontinue the use of steam haulage. The railway industry itself had been very active in considering ways to exploit technology as scientific advances were made – the internal combustion engine was developed to the level where it could power a railway locomotive early in the 20th century, and electric propulsion from an external source had similarly been proved to be viable. Unfortunately our pioneering spirit of the 19th century had been ceded to the new industrial powers, and when BR did eventually resolve to modernise its motive power, the process was rushed, wasteful, and irrational. Nevertheless, the last steam-hauled train ran on British Railways in August 1968 – signalling the start of a period of dependence on diesel fuel while major electrification projects sought to deliver the full potential of a modern rail system.

It should be noted that during the period of railway success in the UK during the 19th century, the Government took a 'light touch' to regulation, trusting private enterprise to deliver the rail system which would bring economic prosperity to the country. Through the 20th century increasing Government involvement has coincided with the decline of what was once a treasured national asset. So the upheaval of nationalisation in 1948 was duly followed by privatisation in the early 1990s - to a formula unique to this country.

Historically speaking our railway companies have been 'vertically-integrated' i.e. they own and operate all aspects of the railway lines on which they offer a service. This responsibility covers all infrastructure – land, track, earthworks, bridges, buildings, track, signalling – rolling stock, maintenance, staff , schedules, commercial matters, etc. It is a subject of debate as to whether the current complex 'horizontally-oriented' model with separate companies each with their own individual specialties e.g. passenger franchises, freight operators, railway infrastructure, rolling stock, maintenance, new construction, etc. is the optimum for the business overall.

Ephemera and artefacts

It was clear to many from the outset that railways were going to have a significant impact on the life and times of the people living during the railway age. As such the railway scene was regarded as an aspect of life which was worth observing and recording, in whatever means were available at the time. Much was written about the railways in official documents and by authors of fiction, and railway scenes were captured by artists, perhaps most famously by JMW Turner in his 'Rain,

Steam, Speed', showing a GWR broad-gauge express crossing the Brunel bridge over the Thames at Maidenhead. When photography became a practical prospect, railways were one of the first subjects to be captured, and later on the Lumiere brothers' first movie film was of a train arriving at their local station on the Côte D'Azure.

However the history of our railways can equally be seen through the many artefacts which are produced through the very existence and operation of the railway companies themselves. These range from the smallest items of ephemera like tickets, timetables, share certificates and other publications, through day-to-day items like cutlery, crockery, badges, insignia – to more substantial pieces of railway equipment like furniture, goods items, signalling equipment, locomotives, carriages and wagons, - and finally to fixed items of infrastructure – the civil engineers' province of bridges, tunnels, track beds and alignments, station buildings, goods sheds, etc.

With the passage of time and the continual process of technological development, let alone the constant 'churn' in the operation of the railway business, a large proportion of these artefacts will have been lost forever. Redundant infrastructure tends to leave evidence of its history for many years after it goes out of use – e.g. a walk along the towpath from Crofton to Wolfhall is the starting point for finding out about the competition between the GWR and the Midland&SW Junction Railway. Otherwise, the activities of enthusiasts and collectors have managed to save many examples of the less permanent artefacts for the benefit of future generations.

Museum displays and trading

Publicly-owned collections of railway artefacts can be viewed at many museums throughout the country, notably at the National Railway Museum at York and its various outstations. Here you can see many items brought together to demonstrate the historical development of railways. For many though it is not enough to be able to see and study these items as displayed – their interest and enthusiasm spills over into the collecting habit.

Many different types of railway items have become popular as targets for private individuals as they build up their collections of memorabilia of railway subjects which are of special interest to them. Such material, just like any other form of antique, is traded by specialist dealers who are knowledgeable about railway history and appreciate the rarity of and demand for particular items.

To take an example, one of the most obvious items of interest in the railway scene is the locomotive. Over the nearly 200 years of railways many types of locomotive have come and gone as new designs incorporate technological advances to improve efficiency and reduce operating costs. Traditionally life-expired and redundant locomotives were 'scrapped' by specialist recyclers for the value of their mostly metallic content, without thought for conservation e.g. there is no extant example of an original GWR broad gauge locomotive. But even so it was not unusual for small detachable items to be saved – particularly the makers plate and the locomotive number plate(s). Many of these have survived to be traded avidly and expensively by modern enthusiasts, and you could expect to pay a 5-figure sum for an original name plate of a popular class of locomotive.

Large scale exhibits and museum railways

The size and residual value of the larger pieces of railway equipment makes them impracticable for most private individuals to collect, but at various times enthusiast groups have come together to preserve large scale items like locomotives, carriages, signal boxes, etc. However railway preservation really came more to the public attention when it became feasible to preserve entire railway lines.

The history of the railway preservation movement arising from the wholesale line closures in the 1950s and 1960s is a separate topic in its own right – suffice it to say that there are now numerous railway lines throughout the country which have been brought back into use in the form that they were many years before they closed, with steam and 'heritage' diesel haulage, slam-door carriages of the steam era, traditional station buildings, footbridges, signal boxes and semaphore signalling, operated under special rules for preserved railways by largely volunteer staff.

Such railways can be viewed as working museums, providing a real-life environment for the preservation of railway artefacts of all types and sizes, whilst at the same time giving a realistic depiction of railway working in past times - for the education of the young and as a nostalgic reminder for the older generations.

Working steam on modern railways

When steam haulage was finally abandoned by British Railways in 1968, they were very keen to prevent any private individuals or organisations tarnishing their 'modernised' image by operating steam trains on their network. This ban was opposed by many who saw steam haulage as an important part of our railway heritage and others who identified commercial opportunities for ongoing steam operation.

This prohibition was never likely to hold fast for very long given the pressure exerted from many directions. In the early 1970s Bulmers, the cider makers, were given permission to operate a steam-hauled exhibition train, and this was followed by a number of 'return to steam' passenger specials on branch lines away from the glare of publicity on the mainline routes.

Eventually the right to operate any train on the national network, subject to technical approval and payment of track access charges, was built into the privatisation of railways in the 1990s. The current situation is that there are many steam-hauled excursion and tour trains operating on the main lines of the national network. Locomotives used are mostly the largest express engines, expensively maintained to the highest standards for mainline running, and driven professionally by a new generation of drivers trained in the skills required to operate these idiosyncratic machines.

Hungerford context

The railway to Hungerford was built in a number of stages, initially as a branch line from Reading as part of a scheme for a Berks & Hants Railway. The Hants part was never built but the line is still known as the Berks& Hants route even though the closest it gets to Hants is 2.4 km at Thatcham. 150 years ago last year, the line was extended west to near Devizes, and at the end of the 19th century it was incorporated into the GWR direct line to the South West via Taunton. Until then, true to its soubriquet the 'Great Way Round', the route was via the GWR main line to Bristol.

The B&H line continues to be important in modern times, with HST expresses to Devon and Cornwall and heavy eastbound flows of aggregates from the Mendip quarries in Somerset. The B&H was taken into the GWR early in its life and remained GWR through to nationalisation – the GWR itself surviving the 1923 grouping substantially unchanged. The passenger service is currently provided by First Great Western (no relation).

There are a number of railways in the immediate vicinity which were closed after nationalisation. The Lambourn Valley branch from Newbury is nearest at hand – Newbury also had a north-south option with the Didcot, Newbury and Southampton Railway. Marlborough had both a GWR branch line from Savernake and was also on the parallel and competing through route from Cheltenham to Andover but both of these have gone, as has the original branch line to Devizes. In all these cases there are still earthworks which act as a reminder of the railways, but almost certainly there are no remaining artefacts which can be salvaged legitimately for further use from the mostly private land over which they now cross.

More tangible reminders of steam days on these routes can be gained from the Didcot Railway Centre, which also has a small operating line on 'steaming days', and the Steam museum located in the old railway works at Swindon, at one time the main factory for locomotive and rolling stock construction for the GWR and one of the largest engineering works in the world.

Further reminders of steam days are afforded by a number of preserved railways in the area, and on special days we are fortunate enough to be able to view some of the steam trains still operating on the national network. More information on these subjects, and picture galleries of the trains involved, can be found in my the articles for the Hungerford Chain Mail available on the Internet at http://www.hungerford.uk.net/chain.php from Issue 117 onwards.