

BELLES & WHISTLES

Five Journeys Through Time on Britain's Trains

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PROFILE BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

THE RAILWAY PLAYER

I practically grew up on a train, but my nominal base, in between journeys, was the city of York. York is still an important railway junction. About six thousand people work on the railways there, more than anywhere outside London, but a tourist arriving by car could spend a whole day in the city without really noticing the trains. When I was born in York, in 1962, twenty thousand people worked on its railways, which were rather less discreet in the way they conducted their business.

As we were regularly told at school, York has always been a major centre for communications. As Eboracum it was a kind of Roman roundabout, with roads coming in from all directions, and then there were the two rivers, the Ouse and the Foss. In the 1830s and 1840s George Hudson, the 'Railway King' (and crook), made York the spider in the web of his York & North Midland Railway. This connected to London Euston via Normanton, which was – and is – east

and south of Leeds. He then persuaded the Great North of England Railway to bring its line from Newcastle to York rather than Leeds. In short, Hudson put York on what would become the East Coast Main Line, instead of the perhaps more deserving candidate, Leeds. York was rivalled only by Crewe as a northern railway junction. It took up thirty pages of *Bradshaw*, which was the principal railway timetable until 1961. As the fulcrum of the East Coast route to Scotland, it was the place where passengers stopped to take lunch in the mid-Victorian days before restaurant cars. They had twenty minutes. It is said the soup was deliberately served boiling, so that it would not cool down to a drinkable temperature in time. It was then poured back into the pot and served to the next lot. York was the place where the 'grass-green' Great Northern engines were taken off, and the 'light green' North Eastern engines put on. It had been the headquarters of the North Eastern Railway (1854–1923), and as a boy I would contemplate the beautiful tile map in the station circulating area showing the North Eastern territory. It was an impressively dense network, and yet my father explained that it had been necessary for reasons of space to leave off some of the mineral lines, which carried ironstone or coal.

With the railway grouping of 1923, and the creation of the Big Four, York became headquarters of one of the four: the London & North Eastern Railway. (The others were the Great Western, the London, Midland & Scottish and the Southern.) In 1947 the railways were nationalised, and York eventually became the headquarters of the North Eastern Region of British Rail.

North Eastern ... London and North Eastern ... North Eastern Region ... All these concerns were headquartered in an elegant neo-Georgian building that had been erected just inside the city walls in 1906. The building's sootier

counterpart, the station itself, was required to be just outside the city walls, but if any station could be said to be beautiful, then York fitted the bill, with its elegant curvature, soaring iron and glass roof spreading from decorated columns as gracefully as the leaf canopy from forest trees. The station sat in the centre of the 'railway lands'. In my lifetime these included 'down yard', 'up yard', numerous sidings (exotically extending to 'banana sidings'), coal plant, water tower, goods station, goods warehouse, Railway Institute. Until 1903 locomotives were built on the railway lands; carriage building continued until 2002.

Goods operations were mainly conducted outside the decorous station. But sometimes, while waiting for a train, I'd watch a fascinating freight come rumbling through: say thirty wagons of coal. It was like seeing a gardener tramping through the living-room of a grand house.

My father worked in the above-mentioned railway headquarters, which he always called 'Head Office', very definitely with capital letters. I was never allowed in. I had to wait for him outside, but I knew that it contained the largest board-room table in Britain. There was a seven-foot-long gilded weathervane on the roof, in the profile of an NER locomotive with steam streaming out behind. During my boyhood a giant radio mast was erected beside the weathervane. This enabled Head Office to keep in touch with Doncaster, Darlington and Newcastle by microwave radio telephone – to command the prime industrial territory in Britain. In those days, the north-east could still look London in the eye, because we had the iron and we had the coal.

By virtue of my father's job, I had free first-class train travel. I would irritate pinstriped businessmen by settling into first-class compartments in my jeans and trainers, and reading the *New Musical Express* while eating a bag of smoky



I. York Station, c. 1906, before the arrival of Burger King.

bacon crisps. After smouldering for a while, one of them might say: 'Are you aware this is a first-class compartment, young man?' 'Yep,' I would say, and I would hope the ticket collector would come along, knowing I would only have to flash my 'Priv' pass at him, whereas the businessmen's tickets might be subjected to longer and more suspicious scrutiny. I once went to Aberdeen and back in a single day, just because I could. Because it was *there*. My schedule allowed a full twenty minutes on the platform at Aberdeen before setting off back.

Every summer we holidayed on what was archly called 'the Continent' with the British Rail Touring Club, whose members were just as keen on foreign trains as they were on British ones, no doubt because they were allowed to use them for free as well. I parked my bike in the hollowed-out interior of the smaller, early Victorian Old Station (in whose dining-room the hot soup had been served), where it was overseen by a railway security guard, so that I never needed a bike lock. I played snooker with train drivers in the Railway Institute and attended gym classes in what had been the loco erecting shop, which explained the generally cavernous size of the building and the six-foot-diameter clock at one end. I assisted backstage with the Railway Players (all railway employees), whose theatre was above the Institute, and perilously close to the station, so the heartfelt soliloquies of the actors had to contend with the tannoy and 'Platform 9 for the 20.15 service to Scarborough, calling at Malton, Seamer and Scarborough'.

Lying in bed in the small hours, I was lulled to sleep – or kept awake – by the ghostly clanking from Dringhouses Marshalling Yard, where about a thousand wagons a night were sorted into perhaps forty trains for the distribution of coal and other freight across the north. One of my early

ambitions was to be the man who supervised this proceeding from the elevated control tower. His job seemed like a giant game of solitaire, which he could make 'come out' by having no spare wagons left at the end of the sorting.

THE POST-IMPERIAL MID-LIFE CRISIS

But this railway world was doomed, as I think I knew from an early age, and my loyalty to the railways was born out of sympathy for the underdog, just as Charles Dickens's affection for the stage-coach, expressed in *Pickwick Papers*, was forged by resentment of the *arriviste* railways.

British Railways had been born under a shadow. At the time of its creation 3 million cars were licensed in Britain; by 1974 the figure was 13 million. At the time of BR's demise in 1994 the figure was 25 million. (Today it's 36 million.) The annual number of railway journeys was well over 1 billion in 1910. It was down to about 800 million in the late 1950s.

In 1959 Ernest Marples, owner of a road construction business, became the Minister for Transport under the Conservative government of Harold Macmillan, which was like making Richard Dawkins Archbishop of Canterbury. Marples appointed his close personal friend Dr Richard Beeching as chairman of BR, and in 1963 Beeching published his report, *The Reshaping of British Railways*, which advocated cutting the network by about a third, and was implemented almost in full. Beeching's idea was to eliminate 'bad traffics', mainly rural branch lines, while promoting the trunk network, which became known as Inter-City. The idea was that people would drive to the Inter-City network, then board a train. In practice, they just drove all the way. Those few railway professionals who have any time for Beeching point to his progressive ideas about freight. In place of the shuffling

of small wagons at numerous yards, he promoted containerisation: larger wagons, longer trains and fewer ‘concentration points’. But you couldn’t see what these new containers were carrying, which (if you were a fourteen-year-old boy) was the whole point of freight trains.

Romanticism as an intellectual movement was rooted in the appreciation of nature. By killing country railways, Beeching killed railway romance. As David St John Thomas wrote in *The Country Railway*:

Except where they helped develop suburbs on the edges of great cities, railways did not urbanise the countryside but became part of it ... The railways were liked – by virtually everyone. Archaeologists welcomed the opportunities for discoveries of fossils and Roman remains ... Geologists excitedly studied rock faults laid bare by tunnels and embankments. Naturalists noted how different vegetation grew on new ground and quickly appreciated that a 300-ton train disturbed wildlife less than a man on foot. Above all, the railways brought a new realisation of the beauty and variety of the British Isles ...

In the early twentieth century the railway companies produced numerous guides to what could be seen from the window of a railway carriage. They were in harmony with the countryside, and with the town. For example, a London & North Eastern poster captioned ‘York, It’s Quicker By Rail’ showed a painting of York Minster by Fred Taylor. Only when competition with the car became acute did railways start to boast about the speed and comfort of trains per se.

As a boy, I felt besieged by Beeching-ites. My uncle Peter was one. He didn’t get on with his brother-in-law: my dad. When he came to our house, he might deign to remove his

string-backed driving gloves, but he wouldn't take off his car coat. 'We're not staying, thanks.' It's possible he kept the engine of his beloved Ford Capri (or whatever was that year's model) running outside while he grudgingly accepted a cup of tea. He was an adherent of the sinister 'Rail Replacement' philosophy, which had a vogue in the '70s. All railways, even the trunk routes, would be replaced by roads. My dad once scored a rhetorical coup by asking, 'And would you run fast coaches along these roads?'

'We certainly would,' replied Uncle Peter.

'And would these coaches follow one another in quick succession?'

'Absolutely.'

'So there would be hardly any gaps between them?'

'That's right.'

'Then that,' said my dad, 'is called a train.'

Looking back, I think Uncle Peter was drawn into the prevailing, glib neophilia: the idea that said Britain, having lost its empire and been outstripped by America, must get 'with it', even if that meant middle-aged men like him wearing flares and long hair, even if they didn't really have any hair, even if this meant wrecking the countryside with motorways and the towns with car-oriented 'redevelopment', and abandoning British industry. But Uncle Peter did seem to be on the winning side, and I think of my childhood as one long railway decline.

Steam traction faded, and in 1963 the steam locomotive weathervane on Head Office came close to being replaced by a diesel. Yes, relatively glamorous Deltic diesel-electrics appeared on the East Coast Main Line. Their cab windows made them look as though they were wearing wrap-around shades, and they were the only engines I 'spotted', partly because they had names not just numbers. They were called

after racehorses or regiments, and I never knew which of the two the Deltic called 'Royal Scots Grey' was named after. But the only reason we had the Deltics was that there wasn't the money to electrify the line.

In 1965 British Railways became British Rail, in much the same ingratiating way that Anthony Wedgwood Benn became Tony Benn. A new, dour and depressed livery was introduced: blue and off-white, known as 'blue and dirt'. In 1960 BR had introduced a series of luxury trains called the Blue Pullman. They had full air-conditioning and an intercom, enabling on-board announcements. Both innovations soon became standard on ordinary BR carriages. So that was the end of peace and quiet on a train, and the pleasure of sticking your head out of the window, or opening the window when you got too hot. (The greater speed of trains also did for those pleasures. You can't stick your head out at 125m.p.h.)

In the early '70s the coaling plant and the water tower on the York railway lands were demolished (with some difficulty), and by now the lustre was going out of our continental railway holidays. Freddie Laker was a celebrity with his charter plane business, and Hughie Green hosted a game show called *The Sky's the Limit*, which began with an exciting shot of an aeroplane taking off and featured prizes in the form of what would now be called air miles. (Not that Hughie Green was anti-train. He lived in Chiltern Court, which sat above Baker Street station, and he had a big model railway in his living-room.)

In 1976 the Intercity 125, or HST (High Speed Train), was introduced. This – still ubiquitous – could do 125 m.p.h. and had pleasingly streamlined front and back ends, but it was another stopgap diesel in the absence of electrification, and when you'd seen one you'd seen them all. The carriages associated with the HSTs were called British Rail Mark 3, and it was with these that BR 'standardised on open', partly



2. The Intercity 125 (or HST); exciting in 1976.